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DEADLY DASH; or, Fighting Fire With Fire.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "NIGHTHAWK KIT," "DAINTY LANCE," "PANTHER PAUL," "THE BLACK GIANT," ETC., ETC.



WITH FURIOUS CRIES AND CURSES THEY OPENED FIRE UPON THE DAUNTLESS YOUTH, BUT HIS ONLY ANSWER WAS A MOCKING LAUGH AS HE RODE AWAY, SHAKING HIS LONG, BLACK CURLS IN SCORNFUL DEFIANCE OF THE HUMMING BULLETS.

Deadly Dash;

OR,

FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "HURRI-
CANE BILL," "MUSTANG SAM," "NIGHTHAWK
KIT," "DAINTY LANCE," "THE BLACK
GIANT," "PANTHER PAUL," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DOOMED TO THE ROPE.

"Down with him, too!"

"Ef he's so pizen fond o' hoss-thieves an' man-killers, let him pull hemp 'long with t'other critter!"

These and a score of kindred cries, some jeering, but the great majority stern and threatening, came from the hot lips of an angry mob, and were directed toward the stout constable who stood with drawn knife and cocked revolver before the closed door of the log jail.

"Hold your hosses for a bit, boys," cried a grizzly-haired, hooked-nose veteran, standing almost within reach of that heavy bowie-knife. "The pizen critter can't git away, and it'd be a monstrous pity to rubout a old fri'nd an' neighbor like Rose, here, all through a mistake."

"It is a mistake if you think you can make me prove false to my duty," said the officer, with a faint yet defiant smile. "I like the breed of horse-thieves no better than the rest of you, but the man was placed in my charge, for safe-keeping, and I'll defend him as long as I can pull a trigger or play a knife!"

It called for more than ordinary courage to utter such words in the bared teeth of a mob of such men, thirsting for blood, their worst passions all afire, but there was no drop of coward blood in the veins of William Rose, and not one of his auditors but knew full well that this was no empty boast.

Still, no single man could long hold them in check, and though they all felt that their ends could be obtained only by bloodshed, each member of the mob was ready to run the risk of being singled out, rather than own to being cowed by a single man.

Though ready to defend his charge, Rose could not yet believe that these men, friends and neighbors, would crowd him to the last extremity. Least of all did he suspect treachery on the part of old Tom Mason, who was almost imperceptibly edging closer to him until, with a swift motion and a strength that would not be denied, the veteran pinned both arms to his side, dexterously kicking his feet from under him. Both fell to the ground together, and almost before William Rose realized his defeat, he was bound hand and foot by the triumphant mob.

"I'll drain your heart for this, Tom Mason!" he gasped, almost breathless from his desperate, fruitless struggles.

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no," grinned the veteran, arising. "Twas the only way to save your bones. You wouldn't hear to reason, you was bound to fight fer the hoss-thief. You'd 'a' shot down your fri'nds in defense of a murderer. An' ef you'd 'a' bin let do that, salt couldn't 'a' saved ye! So, though you mayn't think so jest now, when your mad's up, it was the part of a true fri'nd I played."

"Too much talk!" cried one of the men, with a bloodthirsty impatience. "Has he got the key, or must we burst open the door?"

"You kin come to the fore, now," Race Harcourt, but you was keeful enough to play rear guard, long as Rose was on his pins with a barker in his fist," retorted Mason, grinning at the speaker, a heavily-built, flashily-dressed young fellow with a red, bloated face.

A low laugh ran through the crowd, as though this home-thrust was fully appreciated and enjoyed, but then the old cries were renewed—cries that went to the hearts of those unfortunate then within the rude log jail, for they knew that the sounds meant death, sudden and ignominious.

A dozen of the mob rushed to a lot of heavy timbers lying scattered around a house under process of erection, and raising a long beam in their brawny arms, charged down upon the door, clearing the way with their wild shouts that echoed from one end of the little village to the other, causing the cheeks of the women to pale, and the younger children to hide their heads in fear and trembling.

Swift and sure the heavy battering-ram was hurled against the thick puncheon door, causing

the log fabric to tremble in every joint, and sounding like the tramp of doom to the unfortunate beings inside.

Once more and still again was the assault repeated, until the door was shivered before the enormous strain, and torn from its stout hinges, leaving no barrier between the bloodthirsty mob and its victim.

So at least they believed, as, with hoarse cries for vengeance they dropped the battering-ram and rushed across the threshold.

But, a barrier there was, such as they had little suspected, and despite their raging passions, those stern men paused as though abashed—before a woman!

"Mercy—for the love of Heaven!" burst from her pale lips as, with one arm flung around the neck of the doomed man, she sought to shield his form with her own, making an appealing gesture with the hand that was still at liberty. He is innocent—he never committed that terrible crime. He was at home, peacefully sleeping in his bed, at the very time that bad man swore he fired the fatal shot. I tell you so—and never yet did you know me to speak falsely. He is innocent—as innocent as the babe unborn!"

The words dropped swiftly, passionately from her lips, and her distended eyes roved restlessly from one face to another in the vain hope of alighting upon a friendly countenance.

Less terribly interested eyes than hers could not possibly have mistaken the deadly resolve which was written upon one and all of those stern, flushed countenances. A fierce lust for blood was imprinted upon every feature. Each sinewy hand was tingling and twitching with the longing to close upon the person of the man who had so recently been regarded as an honest, law-abiding friend and neighbor, but upon whose brow they could now read the bloody mark of Cain.

There could be no possible doubt. The proof was so clear and distinct against him. For many months they had been the helpless sufferers. This man and his kind had ridden over them rough-shod; and now that an opportunity was given them of tasting revenge, none but a fool or a madman would even think of robbing them of their just dues.

For nearly a year, that county had been scourged by a band of outlaws; horse-thieves, counterfeiters and even highway robbers or road-agents, to use the vernacular. And, as month after month passed by, the criminals increased in boldness and audacity, though never yet had they been found when searched for.

A Vigilance Committee was formed, but either there was a traitor among them, who betrayed all their plans, or else the scouts of the enemy were most wondrous skillful. All schemes failed, and while the settlers were expecting to entrap the outlaws in one quarter, they were plying their nefarious trade in quite a different spot, striking a blow that some one of the Vigilantes would feel to the bottom of his pocket.

The man whose blood they were now thirsting for, Joshua Bedell, had been one of the first to join the Vigilantes, and had always been regarded by his comrades as true as steel, until the night before this record of wild life opens.

A descent was made upon the stock of a farmer living a short distance out of town, and, in the brief fight which followed discovery, two men were shot. Farmer Heywood was slain outright, and one of the horse-thieves was crippled beyond the power of escape.

His life was spared, that he might give information concerning his fellow-criminals, and while rendered partly delirious—in seeming, if not reality—by excitement and the pain consequent upon his injuries, he divulged two important facts: That Seth Hovey was chief of the robbers, and that Joshua Bedell had fired the shot that laid farmer Heywood low in death.

This much he suffered to escape him, then swooned.

For reasons which will be made clear in due time, Edwin Harcourt, father of the young man whom old Tom Mason publicly reproved, caused the wounded outlaw to be removed to his own house, and spared no pains to effect his restoration to consciousness.

Not until then did Harcourt permit the Vigilantes to see and question the fellow.

He appeared to deeply regret having made the disclosures already mentioned, and would say nothing to criminate any other of the outlaws. Under threats of lynching he repeated that Seth Hovey was the chief of the outlaws—that Bedell belonged to the band, and was the one who kept them informed of the movements of the Vigilance Committee, and sullenly swore that he, the prisoner, saw him fire the shot that killed farmer Heywood.

That was enough. A force volunteered to arrest the supposed traitor and assassin. They found him in bed, asleep. Both himself and daughter Sally declared that he had not been absent from home that night.

Their protestations probably saved Bedell from being hung out of hand, but he was taken and lodged in the log jail, his daughter being refused permission to bear him company.

Thanks to the kindness of the jailer, she was permitted to visit him, later in the day, and thus it came that, when the mob, thirsting for the blood of the supposed assassin, forced their way into the building, they found her confronting them.

It is ever an easy matter to raise a mob, by playing upon the worst passions of humanity, and it was not long after the arrival of the two young Heywoods—sons of the murdered farmer—ere the cry for blood was raised.

The nearest legal court was many leagues away; there was not even a justice of the peace in the neighborhood, and Will Rose acted the part of constable, simply through the wishes of his neighbors.

"We know what law justice is," bitterly cried Simon Heywood. "His friends and partners would raise money enough to buy him off, and he would be turned loose to kill other honest men, while the blood of our murdered father would go unavenged."

There was more of truth than of prejudice in this bitter statement, and so it came that the mob arose in its fury.

Sally Bedell saw that there was little or nothing to hope for from the men whom she confronted, and in despair she found a courage, the existence of which she had never before suspected.

With a wild idea of clearing a passage for the escape of her dearly beloved father—the only human being in whose veins flowed a drop of kindred blood—she sprung forward and snatched the revolver that hung against the hip of old Tom Mason, cocked and thrust the weapon almost against the face of the veteran as she pulled the trigger!

This action was so sudden and unexpected—so adroitly executed, that, wary old Indian-fighter as the man was, he could not wholly avoid the bullet. As it was, his flinching was rather mechanical than from any degree of forethought, and when the weapon exploded before his eyes, and he felt the burning powder, the tearing of the lead through the muscles of his face, he believed that he had received his death wound, nor did he fully realize from whose hand the wholly unlooked-for blow had come.

To return blow for blow, is the natural instinct of the class of men to whom Mason belonged, and, just as unconsciously as he had jerked his head aside from the pistol muzzle, so he struck out fiercely with his unarmed hand. But his fist was clenched, and its bony weight fell full upon the face of the agonized, half-distracted maiden, felling her to the floor where she lay without sense or motion.

With a hoarse cry of furious rage, Joshua Bedell, bound though his arms were, hurled himself bodily upon the old man, and as they both fell heavily to the floor, sought to fasten his teeth upon the throat of the one who he believed had brutally slain his daughter.

For a few moments all was the wildest confusion, and had the accused man been able to use his hands, or other weapons than his teeth, it would have gone hard with Tom Mason, ere they were torn forcibly apart.

As it was, there was a confused fight over the prostrate forms, that for a few moments threatened to end in bloodshed, for the two Heywoods were burning to avenge the death of their father upon his supposed assassin, while the majority, only less deeply interested, were resolved to save Bedell for the hangman's noose.

Numbers finally prevailed, and even the young Heywoods reluctantly assented when it was declared that the rope was the only fitting reward for the traitorous murderer.

But little time was cut to waste when this agreement was finally reached, and with the doomed man in their midst, half-led, half-dragged by the rope which was already fitted around his throat in a suffocating noose, the mob left the jail behind them, containing only the poor girl who lay there like a corpse, the blood slowly oozing from the livid bruise which had followed the fierce blow that felled her, and marched out of the little village, sternly ordering back the few boys who hung about their heels.

They did not need to go far before finding a fit spot for the termination of the tragedy.

The village was situated in one of the bottoms bordering upon the Missouri river, and heavy timber closed in upon the hamlet in every direction. One of these trees, a wide-spreading white-elm, seemed peculiarly fitted for their dread purpose by the mob, and indeed had at least once bore fruit of the same description.

Now that the end was fairly before them, the mob proceeded orderly enough, but with a terrible earnestness that showed on the surface how little hope there was for the doomed man through any mercy or relenting on their part.

A team and wagon that chanced to be standing idle as they passed out of the village, was pressed into service.

"It'll save some tough pullin' on the t'other end o' the rope," mumbled Tom Mason, through the handkerchief he had hastily bound around his lacerated jaw.

This vehicle was drawn up under the horizontal limb which was to serve as a gallows, and the prisoner was rudely bundled into the wagon. By general consent, as being the parties most seriously injured, the Heywoods and Tom Mason were allowed to conduct the ceremonies, after their own fashion.

Under their directions, one of the younger men present, climbed the elm tree, and working his way out on the limb that stretched over the wagon, caught the rope that was tossed up to him, firmly knotting one end around the bough, so that the rope was drawn nearly taut when the noose was about the neck of Joshua Bedell as he stood erect in the wagon-bed.

Mason and Simon Heywood stood beside the doomed man, while the other brother, Mark, was stationed at the heads of the horses ready to lead them away when the signal was given.

This would have been uttered immediately after the rope was fastened and the noose adjusted, only for Mason.

The veteran was a great stickler for forms, and feeling that he was only vindicating the majesty of the law, was determined that the ceremony should not be slurred over.

"We ain't doin' nothin' we need be ashamed on," he said, seriously, despite his injured jaw. "Tain't only to hang a man as deserves the death, but we're doin' this to be a solemn warnin' to them as follers the same crooked trails as he bin travelin'. Them's the reasons why we want to go 'cordin' to the law as nigh as we kin."

"Joshua Bedell, you've bin found guilty o' murderin' a honest old man, who was only defendin' the property he had ained by the sweat o' his brow. Beyond that, you've bin playin' the spy an' traitor on an' to them as ye swore to help an' be true to. A man that'd be guilty of sech pizen doin's, ain't fit fer to be let live, an' 'cordin'ly we're goin' to hang ye by the neck ontel you're deader'n Benedict Arnold's ghost!"

"Ef ye got anythin' to say, now's your time. Tell us who all b'longs to the pizen gang ye've bin consortin' with, an' mebbe it'll be counted in your favor when ye come to answer for your sins in the great Hereafter—amen!"

The veteran ceased speaking, and cast a leisurely glance around upon the upturned faces, with the air of one who feels that he has done his whole duty, and done it well.

The prisoner did not immediately take advantage of the opportunity thus generously afforded him, but stared around upon the upturned faces of his one-time friends, now his bitterest enemies, like one half dazed, or in a waking dream.

Despite his haggard features, he was a handsome man still, though the weak lines around his lips told that he was one easily influenced either for good or evil. He would never be a great man, either in virtue or in sin.

He stood thus until an impatient murmur agitated the crowd, then, as though just comprehending what was expected of him, he moistened his parched and cracked lips and spoke:

"It's all a lie—a black, base-hearted lie! I never killed a man—why should I? He was my friend—as good a friend as man need ask for. And I was at home, in my bed, sleeping as only an honest man can sleep, at the very moment when you say I murdered him. Sally can tell you—but no! you murdered her, just as you mean to murder me! She was innocent—"

"She ain't dead," hastily interposed Mason. "I didn't mean to strike her—I didn't know who it was. I felt the bullet tearin' through my face, an' the fire an' smoke blinded me. I thought I was killed—thought you done it, an' so I struck out, thinkin' it was you I was hittin'."

"Better if she was dead! She only had me—and you say you mean to hang me—hang me

like a dog for the black deed which another man did."

"Tell who your comrades were, or we start up the wagon!" impatiently cried Mark Heywood, from the head of the team.

But there came an interruption as sudden as it was unsuspected a moment before it transpired.

The form of a woman darted through the crowd, and before a hand could be put forth to stop her, she sprang into the wagon, and with a vigorous push, displaying a degree of strength that was naturally foreign to her nature, sent both Tom Mason and Simon Heywood headlong over the side.

There was no need to ask who the new-comer was. She was recognized by every one then present, at the first glance.

Until now the pride and boast of the village—the belle of all the rustic festivities—fair Sally Bedell!

Half crazed though the maiden undoubtedly was, she seemed to know that there was no escape for her father from the crowd that surrounded them, and, standing upon the seat, she enlarged the noose sufficiently to include her own throat also.

"You must hang us both together, for he is as innocent of crime as I!" she cried, facing the angry crowd without flinching.

CHAPTER II.

A DARING DEED.

THERE were two eye-witnesses to all that has been narrated, apart and distinct from the mob. Both were well-mounted on horseback, and armed to the teeth with rifles, pistols and knives. Both were plainly of European blood, but with these points the resemblance wholly ceased.

One was tall, broad-shouldered, gaunt and muscular in the extreme. His long weather-stained hair and beard were of a dingy gray that declared the wearer had crossed the meridian of life at no very recent day. He wore trowsers of homespun, colored with butternut, the lower portions of which were enveloped in leather leggings—not of the style which appears to be the ideal of so many artists, the buttoned and strapped absurdities, such as no frontiersman in his sober senses would think of wearing—but square pieces of leather, wrapped twice or more around the calf, then tied with a single thong just below the knee. A loose woolen hunting-shirt, open nearly to the waist, and a slouched hat of well-worn felt.

Such was the costume of the elder stranger, careless, comfortable, free and easy, in admirable keeping with his person.

The second rider was only a boy in years, though there was something in his dark, handsome features that told of an experience far beyond his actual age, as though the cares and responsibilities of manhood had come upon him in the very heyday of boyhood, aging his heart and making a man of him far before his time.

His dress was after the same pattern as that already described, but of finer materials and neater workmanship.

They were strangers in that part of the country, though the sleek skins of the animals they bestrode, showed that they had not journeyed far since the sun last rose.

The crowd gathered before the log jail arrested their attention, and dismounting, hitching their animals hard by, they drew nearer the spot, curiously listening to the outcries, and the brief dialogue which took place between Tom Mason and William Rose.

The younger stranger quickly grew interested, to the evident uneasiness of the veteran, and when Tom Mason turned upon the flashily dressed, red-faced man, calling him by name, a low, grating sound escaped his lips, his brows contracted fiercely, and he would have plunged into the midst of the crowd bent on some desperate purpose, had not his comrade grasped his arm with a force that would not be denied.

"Great club o' Hercules! boy, don't be so brash!" he hissed in the ear of the youngster. "Tain't in a crowd like this that ye kin do your work, even if that should prove to be one of the pizen breed. They'd climb up our backs an' sarve us wuss than the dragon's teeth that chawed the heel off o' Jason."

It was fortunate for the strangers, perhaps, that the members of the mob had eyes, ears and thoughts only for the one end in view, else the singular agitation of the young man could hardly have escaped observation, and that would have been dangerous at such a time. With their minds so full of the recent events, they would surely have connected the two, and the chances are that there would have been more

candidates for hanging, unless the strangers could give a most satisfactory account of themselves.

The elder of the twain fully realized this peril, and with hidden but resistless force drew his rash companion out of immediate danger.

"You kin see fer yourself, of you only open your eyes, Dudley," he muttered, reproachfully, as the crowd scattered to procure a battering-ram with which to force the door. "Pullin' the tail o' the three-headed dog that howls afore Purgatory 'd be a wiser job than to stir up yonder hornet's nest, which thar stings are hotter then ef they'd bin heated in the furnace o' old Vulcan for a thousan' years!"

"You heard him—calling for blood, just as his father did, when another such a cruel mob—"

"I know—it may be the boy, as you say, but even so, that's another reason why we should lay low an' keep our tongue atween our teeth ontel we kin make sure of our grip. Ef we was to break loose now, them cantankerous varmints 'd think we was frinds of the man they're bent on lynchin', an' they'd string us up alongside, jest to make good measure. Then whar'd your revenge be?"

"It all comes back to me, just as though I had been an eye-witness of the terrible scene of years ago!" huskily uttered the lad, his dark eyes glowing with a light that was little short of maniacal, as he saw the yelling crowd press forward with the heavy timber and hurl it against the prison door. "A Harcourt led then—a Harcourt is leading now!"

"The name ain't so strange, an' it may be that they ain't no kinship atween the two. Anyway, we can't do nothin' now, an' it's the father we want, not the son. Say you'll hold down your mad, or durned ef I don't tuck ye under my arm an' run away with ye like the white bull did the gal Europy!"

"See! the door is down! God help the poor wretch now!"

"Lend me your gun, mister, an' I'll take one crack for the boss!" suddenly exclaimed a shrill, tearful voice that formed a strange contrast to the bold words.

The old man wheeled with great nimbleness, and his bony hand closed upon the shoulder of the speaker; a ragged, tow-headed boy of some ten or twelve years of age, down whose dirty cheeks repeated tears had worn a clean furrow.

"You le' me go!" he whined, wincing beneath that powerful gripe. "I didn't know but you was some o' his friends—"

At this moment the voice of the daughter pleading for the life of her father, came to their ears, and the trio stood as though transfixed by the unexpected sounds, nor stirred until the pistol shot rung out sharply.

"They've murdered her, an' now they'll hang him!" howled the boy, clenching his fists in impotent rage. "If I was only a man—if I only had a gun—I'd kill 'em—kill 'em all!"

The older man opened his lips to speak, but the words never found utterance, for his young pard turned toward him, his voice low and calm, but with a stern-set countenance and a cold, steel glitter in his eyes that could not be mistaken.

"Sampson, that man shall not be murdered if I can help it. You fought against a mob of lynchers once—I ask you to do so again. If you refuse, I will make the attempt alone."

"I know how to shoot," eagerly interposed the boy, a courage far beyond his tender years glowing through his tears. "Give me a gun or a pistol, an' I'll help you!"

The veteran stared from one to the other, in ludicrous dismay, evidently sorely puzzled what answer to make.

He could not doubt the sincerity of either of the speakers. A single glance into their earnest eyes convinced him that the words he heard were not idly spoken, but came from the heart. But, another glance toward the log building, out of which the exultant mob was now pausing, with the panting, breathless prisoner in their midst, the degrading noose even then being fitted around his throat, furnished him with an answer.

"Forty men, at the least cackelation, and not one among the lot but what kerries monstrous sharp teeth fer use at both short an' long range. An' w' only two men, not countin' the lad! Don't it look redic'ulous, sech a idee?"

"The odds were greater once, but you didn't stop to count them then," quickly responded the younger stranger, no more, than a boy, since he could hardly have numbered more than seven-teen years.

"That was fer a frind—almost a brother. This is a perfect stranger to us both."

"But a fellow-being, nevertheless," was the quick response. "I should be false to my oath were I to remain idle, not lifting hand or voice in defense of a human creature in such extremity. Even if he be guilty of the crimes laid at his door—"

"Which he ain't!" quickly interposed the cragged lad, speaking with a strong earnestness. "He never killed the man—he never stole no horses—'cause he was in bed an' asleep. An' then, what did he want or need to hire that cross-thief to swar to his lies, if it was the truth?"

The boy ceased speaking and cast a trembling, anxious glance around him, as though fearful he had already said more than was wise, to men who were utter strangers.

But the curiosity of the youth called Dudley was now aroused, and with gentle force he drew the lad to where the two horses had been hitched in a small clump of trees, and where they would not form such a conspicuous group as in the open.

Not that there was any great danger of their being unpleasantly noticed, so long as the "hanging bee" was still in prospective, for nearly every able-bodied man in the little village had joined the mob, while the women and children for the most part kept closely within their homes.

Once under cover, Dudley closely questioned the lad, his tones soft and encouraging, leading him on to tell all that he knew or suspected concerning the matter.

Sampson stood moodily by, listening intently and with interest, yet inwardly praying that the lynchers might make speedy work of their hanging, and get it over with before his hot-brained companion could carry out his rash resolve.

The substance of the information extracted from the boy, may be briefly summed up.

His name was Dick Dado, an orphan boy, whom Joshua Bedell had given a home in return for such chores as the lad could do upon the farm. He appeared to love his benefactor, and to fairly idolize the daughter.

He was positive that Bedell had not been outside of his house on the past night, after the sun set, until the angry mob dragged him forth as a blood-dyed criminal.

"They've only got the word o' Black Dan Boller fer it, an' hain't he swore he'd be even with 'em both—she 'cause she wouldn't hev none o' his comp'ny, an' him fer lickin' of him the day he was drunk an' sulted Miss Sally?"

"You said some one hired him to swear to his lies," prompted Dudley, not losing sight of the passage of time.

On this point the boy was reluctant to speak, but adroit questioning finally drew from him that, after the wounded outlaw had been taken to the house of Edwin Harcourt, father of the young man whom Tom Mason had silenced, and the mention of whose name had so deeply agitated Dudley, he, Dick Dado, had hung around and managed to overhear a conversation between the wounded man and the attorney of the village, in which the latter promised the former a free pardon and a large sum of money in case the crime could be fastened upon Joshua Bedell.

It may be doubted whether Dudley heard any part of this after the mention of the elder Harcourt's name, for now he knew that his long and for a time apparently hopeless search, was nearing its end.

Nor was Sampson much less interested, though he questioned Dick still further, glean- ing one important bit of information; that Sally Bedell had a favored lover, whom Dick had warned as quickly as possible after the arrest, and who had set off at once on horseback, swearing he would either rescue the father of his betrothed, or else most bitterly avenge his death upon his destroyers.

This, added to a few points which Dick had unconsciously let drop, gave Sampson a shrewd idea that, though Joshua Bedell might be innocent of this particular crime, he knew more about the band of outlaws than a strictly honest man should.

"You hear?" abruptly uttered Dudley, looking to the caps upon his revolvers with the care of one who expects to shortly find use for them.

"He says that Edwin Harcourt is the enemy of the man they are about to hang. That should be reason enough for us to interfere, even though he had murdered a dozen men!"

"It's easy to talk," muttered the veteran, uneasily, though, to do him justice, his forebodings were principally on account of his young comrade, "but twenty to one is powerful long odds, even with a surprise throwed in."

"I don't ask you to help—" began the youngster.

"That goes without axin'," quietly interrupted Sampson.

"See! Miss Sally—they didn't kill her!" cried Dick, as he caught a glimpse of the girl leaving the log jail, her steps as yet feeble and uncertain, her bruised face slowly dropping blood upon the bosom of her light calico dress.

He would have started to join his loved mistress, had not Sampson grasped his arm in the nick of time.

"Let her go—she's found out whar they've tuck her father. She'll make a fuss an' give them some trouble, or she ain't no true woman—an' it's time we need most now."

"I leave the planning to you—my brain is in such a whirl that I cannot think clearly. Only—we must save the man."

"Twon't be much of a job—we only got to kill 'bout thirty-nine men an' cripple the rest—only boy's play!"

This may have been intended for sarcasm, or an indirect protest against the foolhardy if not impossible resolution formed by the hot-headed youth, but Dick Dado accepted it as gospel, and henceforth looked up to Sampson as to a demigod. The veteran was his master from that time on.

This one fling was all that Sampson allowed himself, then, knowing how utterly vain would be any attempt to alter the determination of Dudley, when once fairly formed, he quickly arranged his plans, giving Dick Dado an important part to play, as well as themselves.

There is no especial need to dwell upon this point. What the veteran's plans were, will be shown by the sequel.

The bold action of the half-crazed maiden, fairly nonplused the lynchers, and gained the time needed by Sampson.

With the noose still around her own as well as parent's neck, Sally Bedell made a passionate appeal for mercy.

Her words were eloquent, well deserving permanent record, but an idle pen like this is not the one to perform the task. She was pleading for the life of her father—for the only relative cruel death had left her—and her pitiful speech should be sacred.

Ever a favorite with her neighbors, it is almost certain that her thrilling appeal would have been rewarded with success, in so far that the prisoner would have been yielded up to the due process of law, had it not been for the presence of the two sons of the murdered farmer. Vengeance was to them a sacred duty, and Simon Heywood once more entered the wagon.

He was not so passion blinded as to use any greater degree of violence than was absolutely necessary to remove the pleading, praying, shrieking maiden from the breast of the prisoner, for had he done so, the tide of angry passions might have been turned against his own person. But this very prudence made his task a slow one, and though he managed to remove the noose from around the maiden's throat, it also left the neck of her parent uncumbered.

Intensely excited, the mob crowded around the wagon, unnoticing the near advance of two horsemen, and seeing that no more favorable opportunity was likely to occur, Sampson cast a glance of deep meaning into the eyes of his comrade.

They moved forward to within a dozen paces of the wagon, and less than half that far from the nearest members of the mob. And then Sampson raised his hand high in the air, making a swift gesture that bade Dick Dado play his part.

Promptly the lad made his appearance, coming from the direction of the village, screaming at the top of his voice:

"The boss-thieves is comin'—a thousan' of 'em! They're in the town, killin' the wimmen an' children!"

Instantly all was the wildest confusion. For the moment no one paused to reflect what a highly improbable statement this was; they only thought of their dear ones, left helpless at the mercy of the hated enemy. All else was forgotten by all who had families, and like madmen they rushed toward town.

Thus the majority, but others stood firm, among them the two Heywood brothers and Tom Mason, who were determined to make sure of their vengeance though the heavens fell.

Still, the bold ruse succeeded far better than its sanguine originator dared hope, and he hastened to seize the golden opportunity, he taking one side of the wagon and Dudley the other, leaning forward and striking out heavily with their pistol butts, as they charged home.

Both Mason and Heywood went down before

the wholly unexpected assault, and then Sampson, with an apparent degree of ease that went far to justify his name, grasped Joshua Bedell around the waist, slinging him across the saddle before him, and then dashing away for the friendly timber.

Mark Heywood uttered a loud yell of angry alarm, and drew a revolver, but, ere he could raise the hammer, Dudley lifted his horse and hurled him heavily against the young farmer, knocking him senseless to the ground.

But that cry reached the ears of the settlers, and like a flash the truth burst upon them. With furious cries and curses they opened fire upon the dauntless youth, but his only answer was a mocking laugh as he rode away, shaking his long black curls in scornful defiance of the humming bullets.

CHAPTER III.

FLIGHT AND PURSUIT.

THE very audacity of this attempt went far toward making it a success, since the settlers could not at first believe that these two horsemen were the only ones concerned in the bold rescue. True, none others were visible, but might not a strong force be hidden somewhere in ambush among the dense timber, ready to close behind the fugitives and warmly welcome those who followed?

This suspicion was a perfectly natural one, and the more prudent among the settlers slackened in their pursuit, while still burning powder and winging lead as rapidly as possible, perfectly contented that the young hot-heads should reap all the glory of leading the chase and bearing the brunt of the ambuscade. But these hot-heads were not very plentiful. The same suspicion seemed to have occurred to them one and all.

Fortunately for the fugitives, those more deeply interested in the death of the recent prisoner, were thrown out of the race for the time being. Had Tom Mason or either one of the Heywood brothers been in serviceable condition, the pursuit would have been hotly pressed and the fugitives overhauled, thanks to their almost utter ignorance of the ground which lay before them.

After striking down the guardians of the prisoner, as already related, the youthful Dudley devoted himself to covering the retreat of Sampson, who steadied the form of the rescued man before him, heading direct for the nearest cover, having no special desire to stop a bullet with his back on account of a perfect stranger.

This wish to reach shelter, hindered Sampson from taking the traveled road which ran straight as an arrow for nearly half a mile, hemmed in by growing trees and bushes, riding along which the flying target would practically be stationary as long as within range. Divining this unpleasant truth, he preferred taking to the timber, thus arousing the suspicions of the settlers that danger lay before them.

Dudley turned in his saddle as he reached the line of undergrowth through which Sampson had plunged, and shook his clenched fist toward the confused crowd, uttering a taunting yell, then plied his spurs briskly and dashed on in pursuit of his old friend.

Joshua Bedell was not the one least surprised by the bold deed that snatched him from out the very jaws of death.

It is true that his daughter told him, while in the jail, that Seth Hovey was gone for a force with which to rescue him, but, as no further word or sign came, and the degrading noose was drawn close around his neck, he abandoned all earthly hope, feeling that his death was inevitable.

Thus the desperate dash, together with the unceremonious manner in which he was handled by the muscular veteran, caused his brain to whirl and almost deprived him of his senses.

But the sound of pistol-shots, the whistling bullets, and then the spiteful strokes of the twigs and brambles as he was borne recklessly through the undergrowth, quickly recalled his wandering wits, and he glanced up to see the face of an utter stranger.

At this moment Dudley forged alongside, and dextrously cut the stout thongs that confined his ankles, knees and arms.

"I'm the lightest weight," he cried, hastily. "Mount him behind my saddle. He must know the country better than we do, and can guide us out of this tangle. Those yelping hounds will soon recover from the surprise, and will press us close."

This feat Sampson performed without any apparent difficulty, and a few well-chosen words informed Bedell of the real condition of affairs.

"Time enough for asking and answering questions when we can do so without the danger of having the punctuation done with bullets," impatiently added Dudley.

This was enough. Bedell choked down his wonder at finding himself served so gallantly by perfect strangers, and under his guidance, the rescuers pressed rapidly through the wood, heading for the road by a course that would gain them rather than lose distance.

Meanwhile, Tom Mason and Simon Heywood had recovered from the stout blow which had hurled them headlong from the wagon, and while the former headed a portion of the crowd back to the village in quest of horses on which to chase the fugitives, Heywood led the remainder in hot pursuit along the broad trail through the timber.

The settlers had only lacked a determined leader, and now that they found this want supplied in the person of young Heywood, they pressed forward boldly enough.

Thanks to the nature of the ground, the pursuers, though upon foot, could make nearly if not quite as rapid progress through the timber and undergrowth, as the horsemen in front.

Heywood gave no thought to the possibility of an ambush, in his fierce eagerness to overtake and wreak vengeance upon the supposed assassin of his father, and the destroyer of his brother Mark, whom he had left behind him, senseless, bleeding, and to all appearance dead.

Nor was Tom Mason any the less eager. Horses there were in abundance to be found in the village, and mounting the first that came to hand, without much regard to ownership, he and his men followed upon the hot trail, recklessly risking their limbs and necks in their eagerness to be in at the death.

The fugitives were less than an eighth of a mile in advance of the footmen, when they came upon the road, but that was enough to shield them from a fusillade, and as they could see no mounted men in pursuit, they felt no apprehension as to the ultimate result.

"By the hairy britches o' old Pan!" exclaimed Sampson, as, with beard on shoulder, he watched the rapid charge of the footmen, led by Simon Heywood, now irregularly strung out like the links of an enormous joint snake, as those lighter of foot forged ahead of their more sluggish comrades. "Ef they was only red-skins, or it was only lawful to pull trigger onto white men, what a gay old time we mought hev, pickin' off the critters one by one!"

"We must not burn powder unless at the last extremity," said Dudley, seriously. "They have never injured us—"

"They would have hung me like a dog!" grated Bedell, his eyes glowing fiercely, his fists clenching convulsively.

"You know best whether you deserved such a fate," coldly returned the youth. "It may save words if you understand at once that we did not risk our lives to rescue you from the rope because we believed you unjustly condemned. Had we known you to be a tenfold murderer, our action would have been the same. You were in the hands of a mob—that was enough to insure our assistance."

Joshua Bedell was silenced and not a little perplexed by this strange speech. Never a very fluent speaker, he attempted no reply, but silently pointed out the route to pursue.

This change of course took them at an abrupt angle from the high road, along a narrow trail through the timber, where they were forced to ride in single file.

He gave no reasons for this choice, nor were there any questions asked. That his life depended on keeping out the clutches of his pursuers, was ample assurance that he would take the best method of evading the pursuit.

After progressing thus for a few hundred rods, the fugitives came upon the edge of a long, not very wide prairie-like expanse, covered with a thick growth of rank grass. Half a mile ahead lay more timber, over the top of which rose the distant hills bordering the river.

Straight across this interval dashed the fugitives, but just as the pursuers came to the edge of the timber recently abandoned by their coveted game, Sampson, who was in advance, wrenched up his horse with a grating curse.

There was no necessity for speech. One and each of the fugitives caught sight of the alarming object at the same moment—a horseman just pressing his way through the line of bushes. And behind him could be seen others—evidently a considerable force.

Their animals were turned to flee at right angles, but then a glad cry broke from the lips of Joshua Bedell:

"They are friends—it is Seth Hovey and his men!"

Dudley felt a return of his former suspicions that the escaped prisoner knew more about the doings of the outlaws than a strictly honest man should, but this was no time to be too fastidious, while a score of enraged enemies were straining every nerve to get near enough to slay them, and he urged his horse toward the new arrivals upon the scene.

Joshua Bedell raised his voice in a loud, glad shout of recognition, and as Seth Hovey realized the truth, he bade his men remain under cover.

The pursuers witnessed this meeting, and seemed to scent danger ahead, for all of them abruptly halted and seemed rather inclined to retreat to the friendly shelter they had so recently left. All save Heywood, and his pace slackened when he found himself utterly deserted, and halted sullenly when Sampson, unslinging his rifle from his saddle-bow raised the weapon to his shoulder with a menacing gesture.

Hasty but comprehensive explanations were given on both sides, and Seth Hovey, a fine-looking young fellow, who was evidently born for better things than to be the leader of an outlawed band of desperadoes, warmly greeted the two men who had dared so much on behalf of his loved one's father.

His advances were rather coldly received by Dudley, but Sampson more than made amends for this, interlarding his speech with so many queer and—to them—incomprehensible expressions, that it was little wonder the majority of his hearers at once set him down as "cracked."

By this time the horsemen led by Tom Mason reached the miniature prairie, and thus re-enforced, the settlers gave unmistakable signs of an intention to charge.

Sampson appeared delighted at the prospect of a free fight, but, Dudley shook his head negatively, and the immense influence he had over the veteran was strikingly made manifest by the prompt obedience yielded him.

He saw that the outlaws were outnumbered, nearly two to one, but believed that cunning could shift the odds, where the cover was so favorable for maneuvering, and in a few words explained his idea to Seth Hovey.

That worthy fully approved of the plan, and at once set his men to carrying it into execution, causing each man to show himself for an instant, as though accidentally, in taking up the position assigned him, then, to withdraw carefully and repeat the same maneuver in a different spot.

The good effect of this ruse was soon made manifest in the irresolute demeanor of the enemy, and Sampson put the cap-sheaf on when he led forth the entire force, each man dropping down into the rank grass, but allowing frequent glimpses to be caught of their persons as they advanced. For, if the advance guard of skirmishers numbered a round score, what must be the strength of the main force?

The settlers rapidly beat a retreat to the line of timber, and satisfied with the impression he had made, Sampson passed the word for his allies to retreat, using every possible care to hide their movements and leave the enemy under the impression that they were still holding their positions in the grass.

Reaching the timber unobserved, he made another brief show of his men, then yielded the command to Seth Hovey.

"I'll eat every man-jack o' that lot that ventures to cross that openin' afore the sun goes down! But mebbe it'd be best to leave a man or two on the watch, to bring ye word how the old thing works."

Before Hovey could make any reply, Tom Mason was seen to leave the opposite line of timber and advance across the interval, bearing a handkerchief tied to the end of a ramrod, his evident purpose being a parley.

"Better go out an' meet him hafe way. 'Twon't do fer him to cross the skirmish line, or come nigh enough to count noses," hastily advised Sampson.

Apparently Hovey entertained the same idea, for he sallied forth and crossed the imaginary line of skirmishers, then halted to await the deliberate veteran.

The latter wasted no time in preliminaries, but at once fell to business. He said that Joshua Bedell had committed a wanton murder, and demanded his immediate surrender, together with the two strangers who had assisted him to escape from the rope to which his life was justly forfeited.

"They're not so far off—why don't you come and take them?" retorted Hovey with a short,

hard laugh. "We are waiting for you to make the first move, to strike the first blow. But, let me tell you this much: If it comes to the pinch, all who come will not go back on their own feet. When we burn powder, it will be to kill—mind that!"

"Then thar'll be so much the more hemp pulled. You've run this country mighty nigh as long as you kin—for sense you come out as the mouth-piece, I reckon what Black Dan Boller said must be true; that you're the head one of this devil's gang—"

"Rash words for a man whose heart is covered by twenty good rifles!" exclaimed Hovey, with a gesture toward the imaginary skirmishing line behind him. "Best bridle your tongue, or it will need a stiffer shield than a white rag to save your carcass from some of my hot-heads!"

"Say the word, boss, an' I'll make the critter look sicker then the hoss-fly that Hercules busted!" cried a shrill voice, and Sampson arose from the grass, his rifle leveled.

Hovey was but little less surprised than Tom Mason, at this significant addition to his own threat, but he managed to control his features, and as he waved his hand, Sampson sunk down in the rank grass again.

"Go back and tell your friends this. Say that Joshua Bedell is ready and even eager to submit for trial to any legal tribunal, but not to a mob who would hang an angel on the bare word of a devil. If they want him, let them come and take him—if they can!"

Mason made no reply, but turned and strode hastily away, no doubt relieved when he was beyond range of those twenty dead shots.

Hovey found Sampson back to the timber before him, and gave him due credit for his keen forethought.

The party held their ground for nearly an hour longer, closely watching the movements of the enemy, who appeared equally reluctant to either advance or retreat.

During this interval, Dudley and Sampson had an earnest conversation, only the import of which need be given; their reasons for so deciding will appear in the proper place.

He concluded to accept the cordial offer of Bedell and Hovey, to bear them company until the present storm should blow over, or until they could be escorted beyond danger.

Leaving two men behind, with orders to watch the enemy and show themselves upon the edge of the timber from time to time, the remainder, including our two friends, carefully led their horses back until out of sight, then mounted and rode rapidly away toward the distant hills.

There is no particular necessity for closely describing their movements, beyond saying that they shortly reached a winding creek, where it made an abrupt bend; crossed the stream once and entered it again at the further arm of the bow, following back in the watery bed and going down stream. A simple but cunning expedient, as a little reflection will show. They were forced to travel a quarter of a mile further in the water than if they had taken to it at the first crossing, but that very fact would make any pursuers naturally conclude they had gone up-stream instead of down.

The rocky bed was followed for more than a mile, then a gravelly spot was chosen, blankets were laid down and by repeated shifting from rear to front, the trail was broken to a distance of several hundred yards from the water.

All this consumed time, and the sun was setting when it was accomplished. A further ride of several miles through the woods carried them to another stream, where the same tactics were repeated.

This stream was followed for a few rods, when Hovey drew rein, and turning toward our two friends, with a pleasant laugh and a wave of the hand, said:

"At our journey's end at length, gentlemen! Be so kind as to alight and honor our mansion by entering!"

Dudley and Sampson stared around them, but keen though their eyes were, no trace of the "mansion" could they discover.

CHAPTER IV.

DEADLY DASH AND OLD MYTHOLOGY.

A ROCKY cliff rose almost perpendicularly from the edge of the stream. The face of this was dotted here and there with shrubs and stunted trees, while wild vines and creepers grew in rank profusion.

The first and most natural thought of our two friends was that the "mansion" laughingly alluded to by the outlaw chief, must be a cave off

some sort, but look as closely as they might, they failed to discover the entrance.

"It would be same were you to make the search in the broad light of noonday," said Hovey, with an accent of gratified pride. "Dame Nature wrought the greatest portion, but human skill did the most delicate work, and formed the mask that has kept our secret safe locked in the band until now. You are the first—"

"I will answer for them with my liver, Seth," cried Bedell.

"There is no guarantee needed," promptly responded the young chief, dismounting and grasping a small projection of the rock, swung open a door high and wide enough to permit the passage of a horse, without any seeming exertion.

"We generally leave this closed and fastened, with some one on guard to open only when the regular signal is given," added Hovey, "but I expected every arm would be needed on this expedition. As you see, no harm was done."

Well might the outlaw chief be proud of his hidden door, for it was a rare specimen of cunning workmanship.

At first, the entrance to the cave had been but a small, irregular hole, but this had been broken and chiseled out until of the dimensions before mentioned. A door of hewn logs was made, and one side of this was covered with flakes and bunches of rock, so that, when the door was closed, the keenest eye would have failed to discover the cheat.

Dudley and Sampson followed Hovey into the cave, suffering their horses to guide themselves, for all within was dark as Erebus itself.

Presently the animals came to a pause of their own accord, and ere long a waving tongue of fire became visible through the darkness, gradually expanding into a broad sheet of flame as the pile of lightwood ignited, revealing a wonderful sight to the eyes of the two strangers.

It is now a well-known fact that a portion of South-west Missouri is blessed with a wonderful number of caves under and in its hundreds of limestone ridges, varying in size from the den barely large enough to afford accommodations to a bear or wolf family, to mammoth caves where the curious sight-seer may wander for miles, feasting his eyes upon the fantastic freaks of nature.

Before the late war, comparatively little was known concerning these caves, but the guerrilla bands found refuge there, until finally hunted out, and thus the Cave Region became better known to the general public. Yet, even to this day, the discoveries are still going on, and fresh caves being found, the existence of which had never been suspected.

In one of these caves our friends now found themselves, and as the ruddy flames leaped higher and shone forth with greater brilliancy, an involuntary cry of wondering admiration parted their lips.

They were in a vast and almost circular chamber, the dome of which would have been invisible but for the firelight being reflected from the glistening points of thousands of snow-white stalactites.

All around them were numberless stalagmites which, in the course of countless ages had assumed a remarkable variety of shapes, weird and fanciful, now rendered doubly so by the dancing light of the crackling fire.

Here were clusters of snow-white columns, of every conceivable shape and size, carved as by the cunning chisel of some expert artist, rising from the floor to the roof, like pillars in some vast cathedral. Just beyond they take new shapes, rising from two to twenty feet in height, and with a very slight draft upon fancy, forming statues of beasts and fishes, birds and reptiles, curtains and pulpits, here all snowy-white, there all tinged with orange. And dimly seen in the distance, stood the figure of a snowy colossus, its arm uplifted, its hand clenched, save for the index finger which pointed on high.

Still further on could be heard the musical ripple of water, falling several yards in a miniature cascade, and a small stream of ice-cold water wound through the stalagmites.

"It looks prettier to the eye than the golden hair of Venus," uttered Sampson, but with a little grimace and shrug of the shoulders as he sniffed the damp air. "But 'pears to me it'd be rather rough on such poor devils as kerries rheumatically bones 'bout with them."

Hovey laughed and taking up a blazing brand, led them to another chamber, where the floor was covered with white sand, and the air was pure and dry. To do so they passed through a natural gateway, formed by the dripping lime-

stone, snowy white and fancifully festooned at the sides, while overhead the beautifully carved and fluted drapery was colored a deep orange.

This chamber, where their guide hastened to kindle another fire, was much smaller, and bore evidence of steady use. A semi-circle of bunks, filled with dry leaves and grass; a fire-place and a number of cooking utensils; skins, blankets, horse furniture, clothes and weapons hanging upon the walls, all went to prove this.

"It was a trace of pardonable vanity that led me to show you our curiosity-chamber first," laughed Hovey. "There is much more beyond—indeed I do not believe the cave has ever been wholly explored—but, after all, a good hot supper when one is hungry, is the best of good things."

"I could eat mouthful fer mouthful with the cannibal king of Arcady, an' never stop to ax what kind o' bones I was pickin', either!" declared Sampson, smacking his lips.

That others were hungry, was evidenced by the alacrity displayed in preparing a hot meal, and ere many minutes passed away, all were busily satisfying their hunger.

Hovey was one of the first through, and drawing Joshua Bedell aside, he spoke earnestly for a few minutes, then led forth a fresh horse from an inner chamber, which served as stable, and started toward the entrance.

Directly afterward, Bedell approached Dudley and gravely asked for a brief interview. A little coldly, but with no apparent reluctance, the youth followed the man whom his daring had preserved from an ignominious death. Sampson, like a faithful watch-dog, was quickly at their heels, plainly resolved not to lose sight of his young friend for a single moment.

"I don't suppose it matters much to you," began Bedell, speaking rapidly, as though fearful of being interrupted before he could have his say out, "but for my own satisfaction, I wish to explain why and how I came to be in such a painful and degrading situation."

This he proceeded to do, but at greater length than we would be justified in devoting to the matter. Condensed, his narrative ran as follows:

His daughter had three suitors more pertinacious than the rest; Seth Hovey, Black Dan Boller and Horace Harcourt.

The former, who finally won the prize in love's race, was a young farmer, liked and esteemed by everybody save his defeated rivals, bearing a good reputation among the neighbors, who little suspected he was in reality the chief of the band which had laid them under enforced contributions for several years. Nor did Bedell himself suspect this until after the engagement, when his efforts to wean his daughter from her reckless love were all in vain.

Black Dan was also a member of the band, and when his suit was rejected, he "cut up rusty," insulted Sally and received a sound thrashing at the hands of the father.

Horace Harcourt was the son of the richest man in the village, store-keeper, banker and money lender. His suit had been rejected time and again, but since the discovery of a valuable vein of coal on the Bedell farm, he had been particularly persistent.

The elder Harcourt had tried hard to buy the farm, at his own price, but Bedell refused to sell, saying he meant to work the coal vein as soon as he could raise the necessary funds, and from that day Edwin Harcourt was his bitter enemy, doing him all the harm he could.

By some means, Harcourt must have obtained a powerful influence over Black Dan, since the latter, when wounded in the luckless affray of the night before, on the Heywood place, swore to a lie, black as his own heart, when he declared that Bedell fired the fatal shot.

Though carefully guarding Hovey's secret, for his daughter's sake, Bedell had never mixed himself with the outlaw's affairs, and this was his first visit to the retreat.

"It is all a plot to gain possession of my place," the farmer added, passionately. "They thought to hang me out of the way, and doubtless would have treated Sally in much the same manner, if they couldn't frighten her into marrying Horace, or into selling the farm at a nominal price. For that they bought up Dan Boller, to swear away my life."

"Tell me what you know of this Edwin Harcourt," said Dudley, with a voice of studied calmness, though the fire that burned in his large, dark eyes could not be as well controlled. "If he is the man I suspect, it may be that I can be of some service to you in this matter."

"He came here from the South, as I understand, some three years ago. He had plenty of money, and by the arts of a usurer, he has

grown wonderfully rich in that time. He would lend money to those in need of it, taking mortgages on their stock and farms, then foreclose, and so gain possession for a mere tithe of what the articles were worth."

Dudley plied Bedell with question after question, and finally became convinced that Edwin Harcourt was indeed the man he was searching for.

In the end his passions, until now suppressed by an iron will, burst their bonds, and grasping the willing hand of the farmer, he cried:

"I believe your story—I feel that you are more sinned against than sinning. We are firm friends from this moment. I will make your cause my cause. We will work together against this devil in the garb of a saint. We will deal him blow for blow—and show him no more mercy than he has ever shown to his unfortunate victims!"

"You are a stranger, but I believe you are sincere—"

"You have been frank—I will be equally so. My name—"

"Is Deadly Dash, an' yer stan's Old Mythology, very much at your service. Shake!"

The speaker was Sampson, and pushing his bony frame between the twain, he grasped Bedell by the hand, working his own arm like a pump-handle, a broad, benignant smile upon his countenance, even while he thrust out one foot behind him and gave Dudley a warning kick on the shin.

Bedell was not so blind but what he saw and divined the meaning of this action, but so far from being offended by the evident lack of confidence in him, he laughed softly.

"The names are sufficient, and possess the merit of being especially appropriate. Your dash, I hope, will prove a deadly one to the hopes of our mutual enemy. So keep your secret until we are better acquainted."

"There is no great secret," said Dudley, carelessly, "but, as you say, the *noms de nique* fit well enough, and as those gentlemen over yonder are eying us curiously, you may introduce us as such, in due form."

This ceremony was performed, and the curious names accepted without a comment. Where nearly every man had his "pet title," no fault could be found, and then, as Bedell said, the deeds of the new recruits spoke for themselves.

Old Mythology made a characteristic speech, relished none the less because his auditors could not understand his classical allusions, then, worn out by the fatigue and excitements of the day, he and his master took possession of the bunks assigned them, and were soon wrapped in slumber.

This example was soon followed by a majority of the outlaws, only those who were on special duty remaining awake.

The hours passed by without alarm or incident deserving comment, until the night was far spent, when the man on guard at the rock-covered door received the signal that demanded admittance.

As the heavy door swung silently upon its carefully oiled hinges, Seth Hovey pressed inside, the door closing quickly behind him.

When he reached the chamber where the fire still glowed, his sharp cry awoke every sleeper. And they saw that the chief had brought most important tidings, for his face was pale as death, and a fierce, deadly light glowed in his eyes.

CHAPTER V.

TWO PRECIOUS SCOUNDRELS.

WHEN young Heywood tore the self-adjusted noose from around the fair throat of Sally Bedell, though he made use of no more force than, perhaps, was really necessary, the maiden lost her balance and fell from the wagon seat upon which she had been standing in order to bring her head level with that of her father's.

It was this moment that Sampson, or Old Mythology, seized upon for giving the signal that brought Dick Dado forth with his truly startling outcry.

Sally heard the cries and shouts, saw the excitement and confusion that seized upon the mob, and hope was renewed in her breast as she believed her true love had kept his vow to rescue the parent of his betrothed wife.

She heard the quick rush of horses' feet, she saw the riders as they closed up on each side of the wagon, and saw heavy blows that left her father an unguarded man save for the thongs that still confined his limbs. Saw him raised aloft in the arms of a heavily-bearded man whose weather-beaten features looked to her like the face and front of a veritable angel.

She uttered a sharp cry and arose to her feet,

her arms outstretched as though in a mute appeal—but then the team, no longer guarded, since Mark Heywood went down before the fierce rush of the horse ridden by Deadly Dash, grew terrified by the wild uproar—the yelling, cursing, and rapid fire of the rifles and pistols—and set off as though bound to play a little “circus” all on their own hook. But at the third jump, our interest in their doings ceases, for the hub of one wheel struck violently against a tree, and Sally was thrown out of the wagon, fortunately alighting upon a dense but-yielding bush which broke the force of her fall.

Horace Harcourt saw her fall, and at once hastened to her assistance, finding her senseless, but apparently with no bones broken.

Sluggish and slow-witted though he was, as a general rule, Horace felt such a dread of flying bullets, any one of which might easily cut him off in the flower of his youth, that the dread alternative of either facing the deadly weapons in the hands of unscrupulous foemen, or of acknowledging himself a rank coward, spurred his wits to unusual activity, and they showed him a way out of the unpleasant dilemma.

He lifted the form of the unconscious maiden in his arms, and took the back track to the village, calling out as he did so:

“She’s badly hurt—I must take her to the doctor!”

It may well be doubted whether anybody heard or heeded his first cry, for they were busily engaged in throwing away good powder and lead after the bold foemen they did not dare press too closely.

Horace hastened toward the village, his bodily fear still so great that at first he did not feel the burden he bore in his arms, but as he found that there were no more bullets whistling around his ears, he realized that one hundred and twenty pounds of lifeless humanity, even if it be in the guise of a fair maiden whom one hopes to become sole master of, tells on the wind of the bearer, especially if he is addicted to late hours, strong cigars and still stronger liquor.

More than once he was obliged to pause for breath, and to lower the insensible maiden to her own feet, ere he had won his way through the timber, but when he met Tom Mason, “riding with bloody spur,” upon a confiscated horse, he loudly shouted forth the information that the girl was no better than dead unless skillful aid was speedily found.

This formula was repeated as often as he met a rider, and as none of them paused in their mad race to question his motives, Horace felt that his courage, or rather lack of courage, would never be suspected, and gave vent to a wheezy gasp of relief as he finally entered the gate of his father’s house.

The senior Harcourt met him at the door, with an agitation such as rarely found open expression in his usually admirably schooled features, drawing Horace and the girl into the house, closing and locking the door swiftly behind them. Then he caught the girl up in his own arms and bore her hastily up-stairs, where he placed her in the hands of an ugly, fat negress, with many particular instructions.

On his return, he found Horace in his shirt sleeves, cooling himself by pouring liquid fire down his throat.

Accustomed as he was to seeing the conventional mask dropped from the oily, sanctimonious face of his parent, when they were alone together, and free from other observation, Horace was startled by the look which he now saw.

“The work is done—and thoroughly? I saw the beginning, but it would not do for me to have joined the mob. The man is hung, of course—but all that firing?”

Horace swallowed another glass of liquor, and uttered a sonorous curse before he made reply.

“The work is not done, nor is the man hung—”

Those simple villagers who looked upon the rich man as only a shade lower than the saints in glory—who loved to look upon him as he sat in church, and who were ever so powerfully impressed by his deep, solemn, confirmation of the prayers there put up—would have thought the world was coming to an end, could they have seen and heard the outburst which interrupted Horace Harcourt.

The rage distorted face that of a satyr, the words that flowed in a torrent from his lips, a series of awful curses and blasphemy that ended only when his breath failed him, and he sunk back into a chair, purple in the face, quivering and gasping like some loathsome jelly-fish in the last throes of death on being deprived of its native element.

Horace shifted his chair around to the other side of the table, and warily watched his honored progenitor, still drinking, but on the defensive and clearly ready to beat a hasty retreat in case the necessity should arise.

He knew from experience that the old man was doubly dangerous when he gave way to one of these fits of awful passion; dangerous to those who might be near him, and dangerous to himself. But he knew, too, that any attempt to check the paroxysm would only make matters worse.

“Some o’ these days you’ll kick the bucket when you are playing circus after that style,” he said with scant reverence as he filled a glass with liquor and pushed it across the table, rightly interpreting the fluttering motion of the old man’s hand. “Why couldn’t you wait to hear me out, instead of going off at half-cock, like an old fool?”

“You said enough—all our trouble and plotting gone for nothing!” gasped Harcourt senior, setting down his glass.

“I may not be as bright as some, but I don’t see how you make that out. The man, even if he escapes—and there are forty stout fellows on his heels—will never dare to show his head in this section again. And the farm can’t run away. Then we have got the girl safe enough—”

“Then no one knows—nobody saw you bring her here?” eagerly questioned the old sinner, his eyes sparkling again.

Horace looked puzzled, but admitted that nearly a score of men had seen him bearing Sally thither, to say nothing of the terrified women and children who may have been peeping forth from the cracks of their doors as he passed.

His father uttered a groan and a curse at the same time.

“You are no son of mine! You had your chance, and let a fortune slip through your fingers! Why did not you hide with the girl in the woods until dark, then bring her here, as any one but a drink-besotted fool would have done?”

“What difference does it make?” growled the son.

“All the difference between success and failure. If no one knew that she was here, we could take our time and the devil’s in it if we couldn’t have married her to you, safe and sound. Then, if Bedell was dead—don’t you see?”

“There’s more ways than one to skin a cat,” leered Horace, and then the two precious scoundrels leaned forward and clasped hands across the table.

By this time the old man appeared to have gotten his mad temper fairly under control, and prompted by him, Horace detailed the events already laid before the reader, and told how the precious morsel was snatched from between their very teeth by two audacious strangers.

“You say it was Dick Dado that gave the alarm?” asked the elder, thoughtfully, but before the son could reply he hastily added, pointing through the window, “There the little devil is now! They say that he fairly worships the girl, so he must have followed and seen you bring her here.

“Go out and fetch him in. Tell him his mistress is ill, and wishes to see him, or he’ll run away from you.”

Wondering at this new whim, but accustomed to defer to the stronger will and far acuter wits of his father, Horace put on his hat and obeyed, knowing that the reason would not be lacking at the proper time.

Led by his love for his young mistress, whom he knew to be inside the house, for the supposition that he had followed Horace with his precious burden was a correct one, Dick Dado followed the young man into the house, to find himself confronted by a very different person from the one he expected to see.

Edwin Harcourt assumed his customary pompous look, and closely questioned the lad as to his part in the recent strange affair, and as to who the two men were with whom he was plainly acting in co-operation, but in this game Dick was as good as his master, and held his tongue.

Not a word could they make him utter, nor did he flinch when Horace caught up a riding-whip from the table and swore he would score his back until he dropped. Nor is there much doubt but what this threat would have been put into execution, for the fellow was brave as a lion when only feeble women or little boys confronted him, but Edwin Harcourt interfered.

“Suffer me to deal with the little man, son.

You are too harsh, and only make matters worse by terrifying him.

“Now Dick, hearken unto me. You have helped to commit an awful crime against the law, and I should not wonder but what some of the townsmen will be all for hanging you in the place of the man whom you aided to escape the punishment due his terrible crime. But if you will promise to obey my instructions, I will intercede with them for you, and think I may promise you shall not be hung for this grave offense.

“Now mark me well. You know that Miss Sally Bedell is here, brought in order that her injuries may be properly attended to. You know, too, that Seth Hovey, whom men now say is the leader of the outlaws that infest this county, is her lover. And he helped the man to escape, too, didn’t he?” in a sharp, peremptory tone.

But the trap failed to catch its expected prize, for Dick uttered no word, made no motion, only stared fixedly into the red, oily face of his pompous inquisitor.

“At any rate, you must know where to find him,” added Harcourt, as blandly as before, “and you must hasten to tell him this. Say that it has been decided in council—mind, in council—that Miss Sally shall be sent under an armed escort to the county seat, there to remain a prisoner, as a hostage, until Joshua Bedell yields himself, or is surrendered by his misguided friends, to meet the just reward of his crime. You can remember this? You will not forget?”

Dick nodded assent, for the first time since his entrance, giving an answer to a question, by word or sign.

“Very good. You may go now. Deliver our message correctly, and I will persuade the men not to hang you this time.”

Dick turned and left the house as though glad to escape so easily, running through the village until he was hidden from the sight of the watchers at the window.

“Now perhaps you’ll let me know what under the sun you are driving at, with all this nonsense,” muttered Horace.

“First, we get rid of an inconvenient spy and witness, for, despite his sullen, stupid demeanor while here, that imp is as keen as a brier. Next, we may so work upon the fears of the lover that he will turn over the father for the sake of the daughter, but at any rate we will put him on a false scent, and by sending him to the county seat in quest of her, gain the time necessary for perfecting our plans, and transforming Miss Sally Bedell into Mrs. Horace Harcourt.”

“There’s no doubt about the coal? I mean, you are sure it is a heavy enough vein to pay for the working?”

“It is worth hundreds where he asks dollars, but I mean to get the place for my own price—curse the covetous dog!”

This ending struck Horace as extremely comical, and he nearly suffocated in trying to smother a laugh by swallowing a glass of raw brandy.

But the next words uttered by his father demanded his whole attention, and with their heads almost touching over the table, the two precious scoundrels consulted together and concocted a most diabolical plot against their enemies.

CHAPTER VI.

FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE.

BOTH Deadly Dash and Old Mythology were awakened by the sharp cry with which Seth Hovey burst into the chamber, and though they both grasped their weapons as they arose from their bunks, they had time to observe and admire the perfect discipline displayed by the outlaw band.

There was no bustle, no confusion, but each man quickly fell into line, weapons in hand, apparently ready for anything that might be before them.

“Boot and saddle!” cried Hovey, his voice trembling with a deep and bitter passion. “There’s hard riding and hot fighting before us! Boot and saddle!”

Not a question asked the men, but as though fully confident that their leader would utter no unnecessary order, they hastened at once to the inner chamber where the horses were kept stabled when not under the saddle.

But Joshua Bedell was not so quietly submissive, and plied his would-be son-in-law with question after question.

“The child—it is no bad news about Sally, I hope, Seth?”

“It could hardly be worse,” growled the outlaw chief, stamping furiously as he strode to

and fro, while awaiting the coming of his men. "She is a lamb in the wolf den—for those accursed Harcourts have got possession of her."

"So long as she is alive—they will not dare work her any harm, Seth," said Bedell, in a tone of relief. "High and mighty as Edwin Harcourt holds himself, it would be a black day's work for him when he wronged my child—the very women and children would rise up and lynch him."

"The devil may trust him, but I'll not," growled Hovey.

"And it is for that that you are ordering out the men?" inquired Deadly Dash, stepping a little forward.

"What is that to you?" snapped the outlaw, sourly.

"Simply this," responded the youth, speaking quietly, but with a flush deepening upon his smooth, girlish cheek. "I have become strangely mixed up with your affairs, and when I found that your worst enemy and mine were one and the same person, I pledged myself to see the fight to an end. But this was under the supposition that you were a man who would contest every point of vantage, and not ruin all through a rash impulse. Now, as I see the mistake I made, I beg leave to withdraw my—"

"Withdraw and be hanged!" rudely interrupted Hovey.

"Remain and be hanged sounds but little better; and that is what the whole thing will amount to, if you set forth in your present mood," coolly retorted Deadly Dash.

Here Joshua Bedell interfered, addressing his daughter's lover.

"Our friend is right, Seth, Sally is in no danger, and after what has occurred, it would be folly for you to lead the band forth now. Who knows but there may be spies on the watch, and if the secret of this place is discovered, you will be ambushed as you go or come."

"If you had seen what I have—if you knew what they have already done this night, you would not be so cool," said Hovey, but visibly cooling down. "While you were sleeping, they were at work—and a black night's work it shall be to those that had a hand in it, that I swear, by the eternal!"

"So long as Sally is safe, I care little for the rest," said Bedell.

"Even if your house, your stables, were burned to the ground, and the old place laid as bare as the back of your hand—"

"But they would not dare—"

"They would—they have! I saw the light above the trees before I had left you half an hour, but though it came from the direction of your place, I never once suspected the truth—not until I rode on further and saw another red glare coming from my own house. Even then I could hardly believe my eyesight, and galloped on to convince myself of my error. Instead—I saw the dear old home that had sheltered me from boyhood, a mass of blazing ruins!"

"Heaven's vengeance alight upon the cowardly scoundrels!" cried Bedell, his face flushed, his breath coming quick and hot.

"And I mean to be one of the instruments through which that vengeance is administered," added Hovey, with a hard, unpleasant laugh.

"I struck the first blow then and there, for I caught sight of that coward Race Harcourt, battering down the railing around the graves of my mother and father, and I drew a bead upon his black heart. But the red light fooled me, and I missed my mark, though one of his mates—I could not see his face—fell in his stead."

"Of course I had to run for it, but they didn't follow me far. Afraid of an ambush, I suppose."

"And my place was destroyed too, you say?" "Every stick and plant. That was paid a visit first, for nothing was left but a pile of glowing embers when I got there. They did their foul work thoroughly, curse them."

"No wonder you were half-wild with rage," said Deadly Dash, all traces of offense banished by the story he had just heard. "Believe me, I feel for you, to the bottom of my heart, and I will help you to your revenge as far as lies in my power. Now may I ask what your plans were? how you intended to act?"

"To charge into and carry the town—to roast old Harcourt and his precious son in their own kennel!" was the fierce reply.

"The words are easily spoken, and possibly the bold plan might prove successful, but not without paying a high price. You must realize the truth of what I say, if you look at the matter calmly."

"A surprise is now impossible, because you warned the enemy by shooting that man. I don't blame you, I would have done the same

thing myself, under the provocation. But that shot will tell them there is a time of reckoning at hand, and they will be upon their guard. They can bring two armed men into the field for each one of yours, and though they may not be so well disciplined, they could be defeated only at a heavy sacrifice on your part."

"Another point: while you were fighting your way into the village, would not the Harcourts take the alarm and either seek safety in flight, or at least dispose of Miss Bedell so that you could not find her?"

Hovey was convinced that he had been going the wrong way to work, but he had been in the habit of commanding so long, that it was no easy task for him to own himself in the wrong, and he muttered, sullenly enough:

"It's easy to say what one shouldn't do, but it would be more to the point were you to point out a better plan."

"Did your men return their horses to the stable, and I think I can satisfy you, even on that score," smiled Deadly Dash, with a quiet confidence that enforced obedience.

The outlaw chief gave the desired command, then flung himself moodily down beside the fire.

"In the first place," added the youth. "I am a believer in the old law of fighting fire with fire. Since our enemies—for mine they are as much as yours—have set us the example, we will show them that two can play at the same game."

"As we can act better under cover of night, let them have one day in which to get over their first flurry of vigilance. Then we will set to work."

"You say that the young lady is held a prisoner in the house of Edwin Harcourt—"

"Yes. I took a round through the town, after visiting the ruins on Bedell's place, and while there I met Dick Dado—but he must be somewhere in here. I brought him with me behind my saddle—you Dick?"

In response to this call, a little ragged figure came out from one shadowy corner, and drew near the fire.

"Tell the gentleman the same story you told me," ordered Hovey.

The lad obeyed, but as the first and greater portion of the tidings he had to communicate would be no news to the reader, it would be a waste of time and space to report him in full.

After telling them what Harcourt said, he gave his reasons for not at once seeking out Hovey. His mistress was all in all to him, and when he believed he had thrown his enemies off the scent, he crept back and found a snug but uneasy lodgment under the open window, in the heart of a particularly thorny rosebush.

From this ambush he overheard the whole conversation of the two precious scoundrels.

They agreed to blind the neighbors by sending off a covered wagon to the county seat, giving out that its inmate was Miss Bedell, but instead she was to be kept a close prisoner upstairs until they could frighten or force her into marrying Horace Harcourt. This would give them possession of the coveted farm with its rich coal deposits, for they meant to urge on the pursuit until Joshua Bedell was either killed or else captured and hung.

Edwin Harcourt bade his son, as soon as any of the pursuers should come back, if they were not successful, ply them with liquor until they should be ripe for any work, however dastardly, and then set them up to burning the houses of both Hovey and Bedell.

Thus far Dick overheard their conversation, but then the negro man-servant returned, and fearing discovery, the lad crept away, though still hovering around until he saw the close carriage brought out.

This was nearly at sundown, and while it was being prepared, he ran around and lay in wait along the road it must follow. When it came, he managed to jump up behind, and cutting a hole through the back curtain, found it empty.

Thus assured that his mistress was still kept a prisoner in the house, Dick hung around until he saw and recognized Seth Hovey, to whom he made known his discoveries.

"And from this on, you are my little brother, Dick!" cried the grateful outlaw, bugging the lad warmly. "You shall live with Sally and I when we are married, as long as we have a roof to cover our heads!"

And little Dick Dado was made perfectly happy.

"Now this is my plan," resumed Deadly Dash, "and if not quite so full of brilliant darning as the one you proposed, I think you will confess it can be more easily carried out."

"Dick shall return and see the Harcourts; tell

them that he delivered his message, but say that Joshua Bedell and the two strangers had given the band the slip. Say that Seth Hovey swore he would find them, and deliver the father up to justice for the sake of saving the daughter. Tell them this, and not a word more. Then meet us when it grows dark, at the spot where we first cross the creek, and tell us how the villagers are working. Keep your eyes open, and let nothing escape them."

Dick nodded his comprehension and willingness, and being provided with a supply of food, was let out into the world once more.

"Of course our plans may have to be modified somewhat, by the word Dick brings us," resumed Deadly Dash, "but in its essential points will remain much the same. You, or some of your men, will start a fire, not too close to the house—"

"Harcourt's store will be the very thing!" exclaimed Hovey.

"That will draw the attention of the villagers. We—my friend and I—will hold the Harcourts in check, while you carry off Miss Bedell. With her once in safety, we will show these fellows what is meant by fighting fire with fire!"

Hovey and Bedell both began to express their thanks and gratitude to the strangers for the trouble and risk they were so ready to undertake on their behalf, but Deadly Dash interrupted them with an impatient gesture.

"Spare your words—in serving you, I am serving myself. What I do, and am willing to do, is not through love for you, but because I hate the Harcourt family root and branch, with a hatred that will not end even in the grave!"

CHAPTER VII.

STRIKING THE ENEMY.

DICK DADO was as good as his word, and met the company at the creek crossing, soon after the sun had sunk to rest and the shades of night settled down over the earth. He had done his work equally well, and gave in his report with a deliberate distinctness that carried conviction with it.

He said that Edwin Harcourt apparently believed the tale he told him, since he had persuaded the leading men among the settlers that it would be rank folly for them to set out in quest of the outlaw band, without having the odds on their side, and to do this would be to leave the village and its weaker inmates, helpless at the mercy of the enemy, should they meditate a sudden descent upon the town to take revenge for the buildings burnt on the past night.

He repeated the message brought by Dick Dado, and advised them to wait and see what truth there was in it. And in the meantime for each man to keep his arms and wits about him, ready for use in case the emergency arose.

"He's got four men planted round his house, with guns and pistols an' sech like," added Dick. "Reckon he counts on a visit from you, he's so mighty keeful."

"Nor shall he be disappointed, though I doubt his being able to entertain company for many another day, when once we say good-bye to him!" cried Hovey, grimly.

In his eagerness to insure the rescue of Sally Bedell, the outlaw chief had brought with him all of his force, only leaving one man inside the cave to work the secret door.

Both Deadly Dash and Sampson thought this an unwise proceeding, when it was remembered that Black Dan Boller was in the hands of the enemy.

"He has shown himself the enemy of you both," added Deadly Dash. "What security have you that he will not betray all the secrets of the company and we find them in possession of the retreat when we return?"

"No man could find the entrance from simple description, or even if they should stumble upon it, the door would not open, since we have changed our pass-word," laughed Hovey.

Only a short consultation was necessary in order to perfect their plans in those slight alterations rendered necessary by the report of this young spy.

They expected to accomplish their purpose more by cunning than by force, where some valuable lives might be sacrificed, though they meant to fight fire with fire, and deal their worst enemy a blow that would not soon be forgotten.

The majority of the band were to halt in the timber near the spot where Joshua Bedell came so near finishing his earthly career in the hangman's hands, and to remain there until the return of the others, unless they should be called forward by a shrill blast from a horn.

Deadly Dash and Old Mythology were to steal

into the village and as near to Edwin Harcourt's house as they could without discovery, then wait for the alarm of fire, which would be kindled by Seth Hovey.

It was believed that this alarm would draw the guards, as well as all others at once to the scene, when the two adventurers were to rush in and hold the Harcourts, father and son, in check, until Seth could effect the rescue of Sally.

The men were stationed in the timber, and the three adventurers stole forward on foot, leaving their horses with the band, Hovey bearing a bundle of well-greased hemp, and a jug of turpentine, determined on making sure work.

Dick Dado bore the two friends company, and soon pointed out to them the house where their enemy lived, a two-story frame building, the most pretentious in the village.

Lights were burning on the first and second floors, and as they crept nearer, the forms of the two Harcourts were visible through the open windows, seated at a table well supplied with decanter and glasses.

"We've made a mistake," muttered Old Mythology. "At the first alarm, them imps 'll be out, fer the old man ain't no coward. We could only stop 'em by force, an' the noise would be heard. A crowd would come, an' then how kin we git away the gal? Better let me go fust an' open the road."

Deadly Dash could not mistake his meaning, but he could see no other way by which the oversight could be overcome, and taking his silence for consent, the old man drew his knife, hiding the blade in his sleeve, and stole forward, silent as some phantom of the night.

He had made but a few steps before he saw a man seated upon the lower step of the short flight leading to the front door, and thus guided, taking advantage of the deeper shadows, Old Mythology stole nearer and nearer, then uprose at the very side of the unsuspecting wretch.

He flung one arm around the luckless fellow's throat, holding him as in a vise, cutting off all outcry—there came a flash of steel in the lamp-light, and then a lifeless body was gently lowered to the ground, and shoved under the steps.

"It was hard," uttered a low voice at his shoulder, and Deadly Dash arose from the ground, "but they began the fight, and should have counted the cost. Come, let us get inside and finish our portion of the work!"

"S'pose the door is locked?" asked the veteran. "The windows are not. Give me a back, and while I hold them in check, do you see that none of the servants escape by the door," quietly decided Deadly Dash.

And this was the first intimation the Harcourts had of the trouble that was brewing for them; a slender but resolute form standing before them, a cocked and leveled revolver in each hand, while a low, stern voice uttered:

"Raise so much as a single finger, or utter a sound above a whisper, and that moment you die like dogs!"

They saw that the speaker was in deadly earnest, and they saw, too, that they were wholly in his power. Though there were weapons in the room, they had none upon their persons, placing full confidence in the four men who had been stationed around the house as its particular guards. Though they knew they were playing a desperate game, with desperate men, they believed their precautions would insure their receiving ample warning, and so they now found themselves helpless in the toils.

But hope flashed up in their hearts as they heard the hall door open, followed by the tramping of heavy feet, but Deadly Dash cast down the frail fabric almost ere it was built.

"Remember my warning! Those are not your friends, but mine. Even if the contrary was the case, what would that avail you? Though an army rushed to your aid I could and would kill you both before they could reach you."

Father and son cowered there, beneath the cold yet blazing orbs that were fixed upon them above the polished tubes of the leveled weapons, for they knew that this stripling held their lives at the tips of his fingers.

A few moments thus, then the door which led into the hall was opened, and a tall, not unpicturesque figure entered—the form of a man whom one at least of the twain recognized, and as he did so, his heart seemed to sink clear down into his boots, for he knew that the dead past had come back to wreak its retribution upon him, the criminal!

"Shut the windows and pull down the blinds, Sampson," uttered Deadly Dash, never once removing his eyes from the trembling figures at

the tables. "It is near time for the music to begin outside, and I care not to have any curious eyes upon us just at present."

Old Mythology promptly obeyed these orders, then stood behind the two men at another signal.

"If they attempt any outcry, you know what to do," coldly uttered Deadly Dash, drawing himself forward a chair and confronting Edwin Harcourt, adding with mock civility:

"My name is Dudley Dashwood, Edwin Harcourt, and I am the only son of Beverley Dashwood, of Virginia—the man whom you basely murdered nearly five years ago."

At that moment, just when the old man was opening his lips to answer this observation, the wild alarm of fire rung out clear and distinct upon the air, the cry being caught up and repeated by a score of sturdy voices, while the rapid tramp of heavy feet upon the street told how rapidly the alarm was spreading.

"It is your store that is burning, Edwin Harcourt," said Deadly Dash, with a hard laugh. "You began the work, and we have determined to fight fire with fire."

"The building and contents are fully insured," retorted the old man, with a steadiness of voice that showed he was no coward, whatever else he might be. "Trade is dull, and sales slow. If this is your work, I owe you many thanks!"

"The insurance money may benefit your heirs, if you leave any, but you will never collect it—of that rest assured. I have sworn a solemn oath above the grave of my murdered father to kill you, as you killed him. I would keep my vow now, but that I have other interests to serve as well."

"Seth Hovey will be here soon, in quest of his betrothed, who is now a prisoner up-stairs. As soon as he has departed with her, then will come our reckoning. Not that I mean to kill you at a single blow. Instant death would be too merciful a fate for such a prime sinner. But limb by limb—wherever you can feel a blow—and when naught else is left, the trunk!"

"I ask no favors," suddenly muttered the old man, still defiant, while his craven son trembled like a leaf in his chair. "I know the breed of ye too well for that. The father a murderer for gold—the son an incendiary—"

The bony hands of Old Mythology closed around the throat with a vicious energy that would soon have ended in death, had not Deadly Dash sharply commanded his release.

"He's too pizen to be let live!" muttered the veteran, sulkily, but obeying the order of his young master.

Though half insensible, the old man glanced toward the door eagerly, as a quick footstep sounded there, but Deadly Dash laughed.

"'Tis a lover hastening to the side of his mistress," and adding, a few moments later, as a sharp, loud scream came from the upper regions, "nor need you build any hopes on that score. Your guards have all gone to help put out the fire; they and all others whom you can call your friends. Only our ears heard that scream."

The old man's courage began to quail as he realized how hopelessly he was in the power of one whom he knew had terrible cause to hate him, and Deadly Dash laughed aloud as he noted the pallor that crept over the face of his victim.

"Listen!" and he paused while the sound of footsteps came down the stairs and stopped in the hall just long enough to utter a short whistle, then hasten out of doors. "There vanishes one of your hopes. First the parent and now the daughter escapes you! And thus shall perish each and every foul or fair dream you may have entertained. Not until then—not until you are lowered down below the level of the very—"

From without came the loud shouts of excited men. Then several pistol-shots in quick succession. And after them, a wild, wailing shriek as of a woman in mortal agony or grief!

One and all recognized the voice—that of Sally Bedell.

Not only that, but even more startling sounds came to their ears. The tumultuous rush of many feet, and above that, the sound of a stentorian voice shouting out the words:

"Surround the house, boys! kill all who attempt to come out!"

There could be only one meaning attached to this speech. Their presence had been discovered, and their lives hung in the balance.

Both Deadly Dash and Old Mythology had turned toward the window, and Horace Harcourt leaped to his feet, screaming for help.

In an instant Sampson was upon him, and

lifting the craven by neck and hips, he hurled him as from a catapult, headlong through curtain and window, out of the house!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EXPLOITS OF A LOVER.

ALTHOUGH a man who had played a double part for years, who had many sins to answer for, both of commission and omission, Seth Hovey, only a few hours earlier in his life, would have turned in scorn and utter abhorrence from the mere idea of becoming an incendiary, even to injure his most bitter enemy; but now he set about his nefarious work with a grim satisfaction that was a foretaste of revenge.

He had seen his own house in flaming ruins—house, barns, outbuildings and all. The house where he had dwelt from childhood, where his parents had lived and died. He had seen his enemies even desecrating the neat railing which had been kept in repair around the graves, where his father and mother laid, buried beneath the trees in one corner of the yard—for when they died there was no graveyard, and only one or two houses to mark where the village now stood—tearing it down and hurling the fragments into the leaping, dancing flames.

He would have known who was the prime author of this destruction and desecration, even without the glimpse he caught of Horace Harcourt on that night, without the report made by Dick Dado of the conversation overheard by him, and now that he was about to pay back the injuries and insults in like coin, he experienced a strong as peculiar satisfaction in the work.

The night was dark, both moon and stars being shut out from human sight by a thick veil of hazy mist that filled the upper regions, though scarcely making its dampness felt below. But Seth Hovey did not need the aid of light, and could have wrought his work almost as well had he been blindfolded. Every foot of the ground was familiar to him.

He soon found cause to be thankful for the darkness and gloom. He could tell that the men of the village were afoot, restless and full of motion, as though scenting evil in the air. Perhaps they began to regret the work of the past night. Such of them as owned property similar to that destroyed, may have had time to reflect that fire is a two-edged weapon, and to dread the moment when the red crow should perch upon their own roof-tree.

Be that as it may, Seth Hovey found many of the villagers astir, and more than once came into such close contact with one or another, that only the friendly darkness preserved him from recognition, or from having the suspicious bundles which he carried, recognized, either of which would have meant an instant fight for life or death.

He found that, while the building which he intended to fire was not actually under guard, the street was regularly patrolled, and lest his work should be discovered too soon, when it might be extinguished before he could accomplish his other and more important mission, Seth saw that he must consume much more time than he had allowed himself.

It is not necessary for us to follow his steps, one by one; enough that his intimate knowledge of his surroundings now stood him in good stead, and after some difficulty he managed to effect an entrance into the low cellar below the building proper, where he found an abundance of fuel in old boards and boxes and waste rubbish that had collected there.

Over this he sprinkled his turpentine plentifully, and drew the well-greased hemp out into a long, loose rope, one end of which he coiled around among the boxes, the other leading to the narrow hole by which he entered, and which he was prepared to close up with a board, as soon as he could touch off his train.

This he soon did, and only pausing long enough to assure himself that the conflagration was fairly started, he adjusted the board and stole away toward Edwin Harcourt's house, knowing that five minutes more would insure the utter destruction of the store and its contents, for of fire engines the village had none.

He felt confident that his allies had been equally successful with himself, since all was quiet around the house, and there had been no alarm given. He could see the faint light which came from the chamber designated by Dick Dado as the one where his true-love was confined, and could hardly restrain his impatient longing to hasten thither and bear away his betrothed bride.

It was lucky, perhaps, that Dick Dado came upon him then, and told him that Deadly Dash

and Old Mythology had effected their entrance, for he had been an eye-witness of all until the blinds and windows were closed by Sampson.

At this moment a loud cry of fire came from up the street, and with a happy thought, Seth bade Dick repeat the alarm, and tell the guards, when they should make their appearance, that Edwin Harcourt said for them to follow and aid him in saving his property.

Dick obeyed, Seth meanwhile hiding himself among the shrubbery in the front yard, and when the three guards, unnoticed by the absence of one of their number in the confusion of the moment, or else thinking he had borne Mr. Harcourt company, rushed through the gate and up the street toward the momentarily growing light, he hastened up the steps and entered the wide hall.

In his eagerness to reach and bear away his persecuted bride, Hovey never noticed a dark form lying near the door, else much of what followed might have been averted.

He rushed up the stairs, followed by Dick Dado, who took the lead when the second floor was reached, and was quickly at the door of the chamber where Sally Bedell was confined.

Lover-like, her face and form was all that he could see, as the look of terror upon her poor, bruised features changed into an expression of joy when she recognized a dear friend instead of an enemy.

One swift leap, and he had her folded tightly to his breast, raining passionate kisses upon her upturned face, forgetful of all else in that moment of blissful reunion.

But not so little Dick Dado.

He saw another being—a huge, fat negress, hideous in feature as sin itself—and he saw that she recognized the outlaw chief—that she was preparing to make her escape in order to give the alarm, apparently not having seen him.

If not seen, Dick very speedily made himself felt, for he darted in front of the negress, clasping her huge knees, and making his keen teeth meet in the mountain of flesh that overhung him, drawing a loud scream of pain from her lips, and awakening Seth Hovey to a sense of the imprudence he had been guilty of.

Grasping her by the shoulders and pressing one knee into her back as he exerted his strength, Hovey quickly overturned the huge animal, and with Dick's assistance, soon contrived to bind her hand and foot, thrusting a towel into her mouth and binding it fast.

"God bless you, lad!" he cried, impulsively. "Only for you, there would have been the devil to pay, all through my thoughtlessness. We must get out of here—Sally, dear, wrap that shawl around you. The night air is cool and damp, and there is a long ride before you. Hasten, dearest."

Yet even while bidding her thus, lover-like, he was hindering rather than helping her. But that was only natural. And there was only little Dick to see them, for the hideous old negress was too badly frightened for her own self to take notes, and he had run a great risk in order to rescue her—and lovers will be lovers though the heavens fall!

But at length the fair one was bundled up sufficiently to satisfy his tender solicitude, and with Dick leading the way, and Sally hanging upon his arm, the outlaw chief descended the stairs. While Dick opened the door and peered forth in order to make sure that the coast was clear, Hovey uttered the whistle that told Deadly Dash and Old Mythology that he had succeeded in his purpose.

And then they left the building, ignorant that the dark form was no longer lying there in the shadow—ignorant of all the peril and injury that its disappearance was to work them!

To explain this, a brief retrospection must be made.

After aiding Deadly Dash to enter the open window, from off his bowed shoulders, Old Mythology hastened to the front door, cautiously trying the knob, finding it turn freely. He opened the door and entered, the first object his eyes resting on being a stout negro, seated in a chair, asleep, his duty evidently being to answer the door.

Sampson had come prepared for some such emergency, and his muscular fingers closed around the throat of the negro, checking all outcry, and dragging him out of the chair, he soon had him bound and gagged. It was the sounds attending this operation that aroused the hopes of the Harcourts, only to be dashed by the appearance of one whom he recognized as a bitter and relentless enemy.

The veteran had performed his work well, but as the fates would have it, there was a weak spot in the thong that bound the wrists of the

negro together, and by a desperate effort this was snapped, a brief time before Seth Hovey and Dick Dado entered the building. The negro recognized them, just as he had recognized Old Mythology, for it will be remembered that he was at the frustrated lynching, since his return frightened Dick Dado from his lurking-place in the rose-bush.

He was a shrewd fellow, faithful to his master, and as soon as he could free his feet, he hastened away for help. And when Seth Hovey left the house with his betrothed, the alarm had been given, and a score of armed men were hastening to the rescue of the village autocrat.

The one broad street was brilliantly illuminated by the red glare of the burning building, and Hovey hesitated for a moment at the gate before emerging, but then, bidding Sally envelop her face in the shawl, while he slouched his hat far down over his brows, he made the adventure.

And there is little doubt but what he would have effected his escape before the settlers whom the negro alarmed, could have reached the spot, had not a man, turning the corner of the yard, ran violently against him, knocking the hat from his head with the force of their collision, and turning him half way around, so that the red glow fell full upon his countenance.

The man was a farmer who lived a short ways out of town, who had made all haste to the village as soon as the conflagration became visible, but he was one of those who had been engaged in the lynching affair, and immediately recognized the outlaw chief.

He uttered a cry of surprise, then, being no coward, sprung at Hovey's throat, taking him at a disadvantage, since the right arm of the outlaw became entangled in the shawl of the maiden, and before he could free it, his throat was tightly compressed, and his heels kicked from under him.

All the time the settler was shouting loudly for help, and this guided the alarmed men to the spot, shouting as they ran.

Hovey knew that capture now would be but another name for death, and managing to free one of his revolvers, he thrust it against the ribs of his assailant, and fired.

Instantly that vicious gripe relaxed, and casting off the body—for the shot had been a fatal one—the outlaw arose.

For the moment he was blinded, and moved away rather than toward Sally, who stood as though petrified, and before he could rectify his mistake the enemy was upon him, the revolvers cracking venomously, and with a short, half-stifled cry, he reeled and fell heavily to the ground.

The fall of her lover, broke the spell that was upon the maiden, and with a shrill shriek of bitter grief, she sunk on his body, shielding him from further harm with her own person.

CHAPTER IX.

DEADLY DASH TO THE RESCUE.

EDWIN HARCOURT also sprung to his feet, but whether it was to aid his son or to attempt making his escape, will never be known, for Deadly Dash instantly realized the imprudence he had been guilty of, and turning upon the old sinner he shifted the heavy revolver in his hand then dealt him a crushing blow upon the skull that knocked him senseless and quivering in his tracks. And even as he dealt the sturdy blow, his other hand swept the lamp from the table, leaving the room in almost total darkness.

A faint red glow came in through the broken window, strong enough for the twain to distinguish each other and act in concert, but not revealing the objects within to those outside with sufficient clearness to render their position instantly dangerous.

Those few moments had been well employed by the settlers, who were close upon the building when Horace Harcourt uttered a wild cry for help, and when that worthy was hurled headlong through the window, carrying both blind and sash with him, he was pounced upon by the excited villagers, who believed him to be one of the outlaws, making a desperate attempt at escape.

Their excitement was intense, and each man burned to deal at least one blow upon the wretch. None of them wished or thought of slaying, since the victim was helpless in their hands, for that would only be to cheat the hangman's noose, and so only the weapons bestowed upon them by nature were brought into play.

Deadly Dash heard the fierce tumult, and had no difficulty in divining its cause. Even in that moment of extreme peril, when their lives hung as it were, by a thread, he could not help laugh-

ing aloud at the singular error his enemies had fallen into.

"Brass prison o' Mars, an' winged heels o' Mercury!" exclaimed Old Mythology in a reproachful undertone, as this sound came to his ears. "Is this a monkey show or a circus whar you come to laugh at the clown? Better we git out o' here in a hurry, 'stead o' laughin'."

"That we may do now, and without much danger, I believe," responded Deadly Dash, in the same guarded tone of voice. "This side of the house is in the shadow, and the fools are so busy pounding that cowardly rascal that they will not be very apt to see us as we drop out of the window."

While speaking, Deadly Dash was not idle. He cautiously slipped behind the blind that covered the one window on the south side of the room, and quietly raised the sash.

The burning building was to the north, or up the principal street, and this fact cast that side of the house into the deepest shadow, rendering objects invisible at the distance of a very few feet.

As he listened to hear if any of their enemies were lurking near, Old Mythology anticipated him, and thrust himself through the opening, to bear the first brunt, if danger there should be. But there came back only a faint hiss, that told Deadly Dash the coast was clear, and the next moment the youth alighted beside his faithful friend.

With weapons ready for use in case they should be intercepted, the two adventurers crept along in the deeper shadows, where the shrubbery was densest, and quickly gained the fence, without having encountered any foemen, though loud cries and excited shouts seemed to come from every spot save the particular one they occupied.

Their danger would begin in earnest, as soon as they should cross the fence and enter the fire-lighted street, but as he caught sight of a confused group only a few rods before him—as he distinguished the prostrate form of a man, with a woman bending over him, being forcibly torn from the body by half a dozen arms, she screaming and begging for mercy—not for herself, but for the one whom she was trying to protect from their weapons—Deadly Dash forgot this, and leaping over the barrier, he ran swiftly to the rescue.

Old Mythology made one ineffectual grasp at the youth, then followed swiftly, to share his fate for weal or woe.

Deadly Dash did not pause to count the odds. He only saw that the man whose friend and ally he had so strangely become, was in trouble; that, and heard the appealing cries of a woman in distress.

Yet he acted with a degree of coolness far beyond his years, uttering no sound, retaining his fire until so near that every shot should count without running any risk of striking the wrong target.

Then he opened fire, and every shot was aimed to kill or disable, for he knew that the rescue must be speedy and complete, for the sounds of firing would turn all eyes upon them, and lead to a united charge of the enemy in that direction.

Only a few feet behind, Old Mythology ably seconded the actions of his young master, and almost before she or they realized the truth, the maiden was free, and three of her assailants were writhing upon the ground.

"Pick him up—make for the shadows!" cried Deadly Dash, hurling himself upon the two settlers still afoot, felling one with a swift stroke from his pistol-butt, and causing the other to turn and flee as though the foul fiend and all his imps were at his heels.

Old Mythology grasped the form of the outlaw chief and flung it across his broad shoulders, while Deadly Dash, with one arm flung around the waist of the half-fainting girl, led the way toward a portion of the village where a clump of densely leaved trees cast a deep gloom over the earth.

All this had transpired with far greater rapidity than it can be read, and the rescue was effected before any of the settlers within eyesight could fairly comprehend what was the exact situation of affairs.

But now, as our friends turned to flee, the spell seemed broken, and a few hasty shots were discharged after them, while with loud and angry rallying cries, the settlers rushed forward in hot pursuit.

With a backward glance Deadly Dash saw this, and snatching away the horn worn by Seth Hovey, clapped it to his lips and sent forth the shrill blast that would tell the outlaw band that their services were needed.

At this sound the settlers slackened their pace, and finally paused, evidently afraid of being drawn into an ambush.

As he noticed this welcome fact, Deadly Dash pressed on with increased speed, in a few moments gaining the desired refuge.

In the thickest of the shadow stood a stable, and near it were several large piles of cordwood. Without the aid of a light, it would require very close searching to discover those in hiding here, unless they were willing to be found.

"Lay low here, and guard them until I can send horses and help," said Deadly Dash, hurriedly addressing Old Mythology. "I must go and meet the band, or they'll only mix up matters worse than they are."

Without pausing for a reply, he darted away through the gloom, heading so as to intercept his allies, and as soon as he had passed to a safe distance from the hiding-place, he again sounded his horn, repeating this at brief intervals, both to guide the horsemen, and to guard against their riding over him or treating him as one of the enemy.

A few moments later he was among them, and hastily mounting his own horse, briefly told them what had occurred; that their chief was slightly wounded, and the spot where he was in waiting with Miss Bedell and Old Mythology, for the spare horses, was quickly described.

Two men were dispatched thither with the extra horses, and then Deadly Dash briefly addressed the outlaw band.

"Were we to retreat now, it would give these rascals fresh courage, and they would follow us hotly. Besides we have been able to only partially accomplish our purpose. If you will trust yourselves under my command—"

"We'll follow wherever you lead," cried a sturdy voice.

"Then enough is said! and we will give these fellows something to talk about. Spread out, and sweep the street clean as we go!" cried Deadly Dash, all afire, like a young tiger that has just taken its first taste of human blood.

These orders were greeted with a wild, exultant yell, for Seth Hovey had ever kept a stiff curb on his men, and now that they were bidden to give full vent to their reckless nature, they were like boys fresh loosed from school.

That tumultuous yell told the startled settlers what was coming, and completed the demoralization begun by the shrill trumpet blast.

They had no acknowledged leader, were ignorant of all discipline, and thought not of resolute co-operation, but each man looked after his own safety, as the yelling troop came thundering down the street, their weapons flashing in the ruddy glow, for two buildings adjoining the one first fired were now all ablaze.

The outlaws made good use of the privilege accorded them, and wherever a footman was seen scuttling along in mad terror, a dozen pistol balls were sent whistling after him.

For the most part these went wide of the mark, for night firing is but uncertain work at the best, and when the marksman is riding a spirited horse at full gallop, the difficulty of bringing down a moving target is increased a thousand-fold. Nevertheless, more than one bullet found its billet.

Clear through the village swept the reckless riders, none enjoying the mad race more than the stripling who rode at the head, his long curls floating in the breeze caused by his own swift passage, his face gloriously beautiful as that of an archangel.

As they turned and swept their way back again, they were met by Old Mythology, who fell in alongside his young master.

In a few hasty words he said that they had been found by the men sent forward, that Seth Hovey was not seriously hurt, but that he desired him, Deadly Dash, to leave the majority of his men to keep up the excitement, while he secured both Edwin Harcourt and Black Dan Boller.

"That was my intention at first, but in the mad excitement I had forgotten all about them," admitted Deadly Dash, with a short laugh. "We'll not need many men for the work. Boller is wounded, and Harcourt knocked senseless. I only hope I did not kill him—such a death would be too great a mercy for one guilty of his crimes!"

"Better send what men we don't want back to the boss, then," said Sampson, in a guarded tone. "You've woke the devil up in 'em, an' it's no two to one they won't cut loose 'mong the women an' children."

This was good advice, and Deadly Dash acted upon it, leading the entire band over to where Seth Hovey, a little stiff and sore from a bullet-wound in his shoulder, added to the rough

handling he received before he was rescued, and gracefully resigned his command.

"Three men to bring Boller here are all I will need," he said. "My old friend and I can handle Harcourt."

Hovey detailed the three men requested, and bidding them make what haste was compatible with due prudence, dismissed them on their important mission.

The five men rode direct up to the Harcourt mansion, dismounting at the steps, and leaving their horses in charge of one of their number, rushed into the house, two of them running upstairs in quest of the wounded traitor, while Deadly Dash and Old Mythology entered the room where they had left the old man insensible.

But the room was empty—Edwin Harcourt was gone!

CHAPTER X.

A BILLETED BULLET.

THIS was a balk totally unexpected, and for the first few moments our two adventurers could not bring themselves to believe that Edwin Harcourt had indeed escaped them. Only such a very short time had elapsed since Deadly Dash struck him down with a blow from his heavy revolver-butt full upon his unprotected head, that it did not seem possible for him to have recovered sufficiently to escape from the room, much less the house.

Under this impression, not yet forgetting prudence so far as to bring the hall lamp into the room, to yield their persons a plain target for some steadier nerved than common among the villagers, Deadly Dash and Old Mythology groped their way around the room, feeling in every corner, until fully convinced that Edwin Harcourt had certainly made his escape, either alone or aided.

"The devil's claimed his own—that's my idee!" muttered Old Mythology, in a tone of utter disgust. "While we was playin' the fool out yonder, he slipped in an' kerried him off—"

"It may be that he is still in the house," interposed Deadly Dash, not exactly relishing this left-handed slap, for he knew now that he had indeed acted foolishly in "playing circus" through the town, instead of at once securing the advantage he had gained, and making sure of the second object of their bold raid—the capture of Edwin Harcourt and Black Dan Boller. "If up-stairs, the boys will rout him out; let us look through the rooms below."

Deadly Dash, no longer thinking of an ambushed shot, took down the hall lamp and made a hasty but thorough search through the other three rooms of the ground floor, only desisting when satisfied that Edwin Harcourt was not hidden any place in those regions.

As they returned to the hall, they were met by the two men who had been dispatched upstairs after Black Dan Boller, returning as they went, empty-handed.

"Thar's not a livin' soul up thar, 'less you call a big, fat nigger wench one—an' she's trussed up like a hog ready fer roastin'!" was the terse report made by them.

Deadly Dash looked sorely perplexed. He could account for the escape of Edwin Harcourt, by allowing him an unusually thick and tough skull, since his limbs were left sound and unfettered, but how the traitorous outlaw, who was supposed to be seriously wounded, could have left his bed, much less the house, was beyond his comprehension.

He was unwilling to return wholly empty-handed, and though he knew that delay might be dangerous, he led the way up the broad flight of stairs, followed by the three men, and by the aid of the lamp he still carried, instituted a careful and thorough search for the lost game.

But at length even he was obliged to admit that it was lost—that if either of those men for whom they were searching was under that roof, they had stowed themselves away in hiding places unusually snug.

"They're more days a-comin', an' by the sarpint o' Minervy! we'll ketch the slippery coons whar the wool's short, yit!" was the consolatory remark made by Old Mythology, as they descended the stairs, extinguished the lamp and emerged from the building, where the man left in charge of the horses greeted them with ill-concealed anxiety.

"Thar's trouble a brewin' down yender!" he exclaimed. "Somebody's takin' the lead 'mong the critters we skeered so bad, an' rallyin' 'em right smart, I should reckon."

This was clearly evident from the sounds which came from the direction indicated; near

the lower end of the street, where the lessening glare of the fire hardly penetrated.

The sounds, shouts and cheers of men, mingled with clear, sharp words in an authoritative voice, were not such as would be made by persons in a panic, but told the hearers that some master-spirit was at work busily rallying the villagers in numbers that might speedily become dangerous.

"Follow—on to where we left the captain!" cried Deadly Dash, leaping into the saddle and riding rapidly across the fire-lighted street.

As he did so, from the dark shadows that lay on the south side of the building, there became visible two bright flashes, and a brace of bullets whistled past his person, fortunately without inflicting any injury. But the incident showed them all that with the brief lull in the attack, the enemy were rapidly regaining their natural courage.

A few moments carried them to where the outlaw leader and the remainder of his band were awaiting their arrival.

Deadly Dash coldly delivered his report, his stiffness increased by the knowledge that he was mainly to blame for the escape of Edwin Harcourt, if not of both the persons they were so desirous of securing, but if Seth Hovey entertained the same belief, he showed it not by word or gesture.

He would have been less than human could he have forgotten so soon the intrepid manner in which this youth had rescued him from almost certain death.

"The sooner we leave the place, then, the better," he said. "We will soon have a hornet's nest about our ears—"

"Mebbe I'm a old fool," bluntly interrupted Old Mythology, "but yer's the way I look at it. Ef we run now, they'll foller us red-hotter then Orion when he chased the gal-pigeons. That'd be jist the one thing they want to make 'em as bold as the giants that built a ladder o' mountains fer to scale heaven itself! But one good charge—a heap o' loud yells, an' a few bitin' bullets 'll set 'em wild ag'in."

The outlaw chief hesitated. He believed that a charge would bring on a fight, in which some of his men might be killed or injured, but Old Mythology added:

"Better a little scrimmage now, when the odds is on our side, then wait ontel they git a good ready. We kin scatter 'em now, but when they all git together, it'll be a boss of a different color. They'll foller us to the hole in the wall, an' mebbe cut in ahead o' us, while we're breakin' the trail—"

"He is right," interposed Deadly Dash. "You are wounded, and have a lady under your charge in addition. Take several of the men, and strike for the Retreat. I will lead the rest, charge down and scatter those fellows, then swing around and overtake you."

The majority of the outlaws, reckless of personal danger like all of their class, were eager for the adventure, and Seth Hovey reluctantly gave his consent.

He, Sally, Joshua Bedell and several of the men, started on the retreat, while Deadly Dash, at the head of the main force, with Old Mythology at his side, walked their horses toward the lower end of the town, where the settlers were being rallied, hoping to get near enough before being discovered to override all opposition and effectually put a stop to all further movements of the sort, at least for that night.

But in this they were fated to be disappointed.

From out the darkness came several pistol-shots, and one of the outlaws fell from his saddle like a log of wood, shot stone dead, while another uttered a curse of rage and pain as a bullet tore through his cheek.

Instantly Deadly Dash was beside the fallen man, but found him beyond all earthly aid, and leaping into the saddle again, he gave the word to charge down the street.

It was a wild, impetuous rush, such as few trained troops could have withstood, and the settlers scattered before them like chaff before a gust of wind.

Still, a number of shots were fired as they were swallowed up by the darkness, and one of the bullets was billeted.

Old Mythology felt his left arm swing powerless, while a thousand red hot needles seemed piercing the flesh above his elbow, but no sound save a hissing curse passed his lips, and Deadly Dash never suspected how seriously his old friend was wounded.

Old Mythology had his reasons for acting thus.

He knew that were Deadly Dash to learn how severe was his injury, the impulsive youth

would insist upon giving it the proper attention, no matter what the risk incurred by so doing, and the safety of his young companion was of infinitely more importance to him than his own comfort, or even life.

So, saying nothing of the wound, though the pain as the shattered bones ground together with every motion, was exquisite, the tough old fellow loosened his belt a hole or two, poked his arm through it, then drew it tight again, thus pinning his arm firmly to his side.

Sweeping around as intended, after scattering the enemy. Deadly Dash led his men at a swift trot until Seth Hovey and companions were overtaken, then resigned his temporary command, falling back alongside his old friend.

It was fortunate for the secret which the latter was determined to keep, if it lay within the limits of human endurance, until the Retreat was reached, that Deadly Dash did not feel in the humor for conversation. The pain produced by the grinding of the shattered bones was so great that he must have betrayed himself were he forced to speak.

As it was, the blood was flowing freely from the wound, thanks to the motion of the horse he bestrode, despite the handkerchief which he had contrived to bind tightly around it, and as they put mile after mile behind them, this loss of blood began to tell even upon his iron frame. He felt that he was growing preceptibly weaker, turning faint and sick at the stomach from this and the intense pain.

But he made no sign, gave no moan, until they reached the point where the creek was to be crossed. And then, but for the keen eyes of Deadly Dash, he would have lain as he sunk, upon the neck of his horse.

Alarmed, Deadly Dash grasped at him, and felt that one side of his friend was literally saturated with blood.

He instantly gave the alarm, and though Old Mythology, rousing himself as he heard the words, feebly declared that he was good for a ride of a thousand miles further, a halt was called, he was lifted from the saddle and gently deposited under a tree.

Fortunately there was one among the outlaw band who had been a surgeon in good practice before liquor degraded him to the level he now occupied, and Seth Hovey bade him do the best he could for the wounded man.

It was Old Mythology himself that urged Hovey to push on for the Retreat at full speed, lest the enemy should get ahead of and ambush them.

There was sound sense in this observation, and all rode on save the surgeon, Joshua Bedell, two outlaws and the two friends.

Though there might be danger in it, a fire was clearly a necessity before the wound could be properly attended to, and moving some distance from the road, one was kindled in a secluded spot.

Not a little to his gratification, since he was unprovided with instruments, the surgeon found that the bullet had passed entirely through the arm, and after being cleansed, there was nothing to do but bandage and put the broken member in splints, until it could receive more careful treatment when the cave was reached.

Still, this consumed more time than any, unless it was the patient, realized; time that was far more precious than gold.

For, just as the surgeon was putting the final touches to his work, with a complacency truly professional, the sharp crackling of a decayed stick came to their ears, causing them one and all to glance in that direction, intuitively feeling that there was trouble brewing of some sort.

And a moment later these suspicions were fully verified, in a manner that was truly appalling!

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT AN EVIL MAN CAN DO.

DEADLY DASH was quite right in concluding that Edwin Harcourt was endowed by nature with an uncommonly hard head, for in fact he was upon his feet and looking out of the ruined window, a witness of the daring manner in which two of his enemies rescued other two out of the clutch of the settlers. And he saw their further retreat until the black shadows swallowed them up.

A bitter curse broke from his lips, and that sound attracted the attention of the men who were gathered around the luckless wretch whom the powerful arms of Old Mythology had flung headlong through the window.

The red glow from the crumbling buildings shone upon his face with sufficient strength for it to be instantly recognized, despite the blood which trickled over it from a scalp wound

among his gray hairs, and one of their number called out in a rather uncertain tone of consolation:

"We've got one of 'em safe enough, anyhow—the one you knocked endlong through the window!"

"Ye blind fools!" snarled Harcourt, fairly gnashing his teeth, so intense was his rage and disappointment. "That is my son Horace. If you have done him any injury, by the hand that made me! I'll hang every mother's son of ye!"

This outburst gave the men their first suspicion of the truth—that they had been expending their blows upon a friend instead of an enemy—and before Edwin Harcourt could make his way out of the building, they had made the discovery and fled in hot haste.

So Edwin Harcourt found the body of his son wholly deserted when he reached the spot, the bruised and battered face upturned in the red light, looking horrible enough.

The first glance told him all, yet he knelt beside what had once been his son, and only ceased his unavailing efforts to detect some lingering trace of life, when the clear blast of the horn sounded by Deadly Dash told him that the stirring events of that night were not yet over.

Then came the longing for revenge, and warned of the necessity for haste by the repeated blasts of the horn, Edwin Harcourt only paused to drag the corpse of his son under a rosebush, where it would escape casual observation, then entered the house, secured his weapons and set off to rally the villagers.

He could effect little until after that headlong charge down and up the street by the reckless outlaws, for the villagers were too thoroughly alarmed for his undeniably great influence over them to make itself felt at once, but during the lull that followed, his efforts were better rewarded.

Naturally the villagers had fled toward the lower end of their town, since there the shadows were deepest, affording them a better chance of eluding the enemy, and it was there that Edwin Harcourt put forth his greatest endeavors, while precious time was being lost by the enemy in vainly searching the house, under guidance of Deadly Dash.

He told those whom he had collected together, that the odds were all on their side, if they only chose to think so.

"The entire band does not number above twenty," he cried, earnestly. "Black Dan Boller told me so. Then why do you let them scatter you, like a flock of timid sheep, when there are nearly fifty good, stout men and honest, within the sound of my voice? Bah! you can crush them at a single blow, if you only think so!"

Much more to the same purport he said, and one by one the village flocked around him.

Their courage and confidence, too, were rallying in a like ratio, and had the final charge led by Deadly Dash and Old Mythology been delayed for a few minutes longer, the result would certainly have been more disastrous, and the outlaw band have encountered a more vigorous defense.

As it was, the settlers scattered even while delivering their first and only volley, and with them went Edwin Harcourt.

It was his hand that discharged the bullet which crippled Old Mythology, but which had been intended for the heart of Deadly Dash, whom the old man quickly recognized.

The outlaws had scarcely passed before Harcourt was once more rallying his fellow townsmen, more determined than before to carry the war into the enemy's country.

"It is either they or us," he cried, earnestly. "One party or the other must perish. And unless we turn upon them before long, we will have nothing left to fight for but our bare lives."

"They have shown us a specimen of their work to-night. They have shot down our men and burned our houses. They have caused the death of my son—he lies murdered yonder in my door-yard. And if we meekly sit down beneath this sore infliction, before another week passes, there will not be a single family in our town but what will be called upon to mourn as I am mourning!"

"We must kill or be killed. There is no middle course. Then look to your weapons and place yourselves under my guidance. I promise you both revenge and success."

"I could lead you direct to the cave where the assassins hide from justice. I can tell you their secret signals and passwords, for I learned them all from Black Dan Boller on promising to use my influence in saving him from the gallows."

"If we are prompt, we can reach the rendez-

vous before the enemy, for while we can ride direct thither, they are obliged to conceal their trail by following the winding bed of the creek and taking many other precautions that will consume much time. Thus we can get ahead of them, and placing ourselves in ambush, kill or capture the entire gang without giving them the chance to fire a single shot ere all is over," and half an hour after that last charge, full a score and a half of well armed men were in the saddle, ready for the adventure.

Edwin Harcourt led them out of town at a rapid trot, Tom Mason riding at his side and acting as general adviser. By his advice they were to follow the main road until at the point where the creek was first struck, then take a bee-line for the hills in which the cave was situated. And it was his prudence that sent him, as scout, ahead of the party, on foot, when they neared the stream, lest the outlaws, suspecting pursuit, should have laid an ambush at or near the crossing.

His keen eye, unimpaired by his wound, and trained by many an encounter of skill with the wily red-skins during his long career as trapper, quickly discovered a small fire kindled in a secluded spot, and stealing forward he took in the peculiar scene at a glance, then retreated as silently and hastened to report to Harcourt.

"Tain't no trap or ambuscade," he said, positively, "or they wouldn't hev started a fire. They's only six, an' one o' them is wounded. They're a-dressin' of his arm."

"Who are they? Any one of importance among them?"

"The cripple is the big gray feller that rid off with Josh Bedell, jest when we thought the rope was sure o' him. Then the young feller that kep' him compny is thar. So is Josh Bedell himself—"

A fierce snarl of exultation came from the parted lips of Edwin Harcourt at this information, and he started forward a pace as though about to rush single-handed upon his enemies, but Mason checked him.

"They ain't no sech hurry, an' ye may lose some on 'em unless you take it cool an' easy. They've got a nasty hurt to do up—broken bones, I reckon—an' it'll take time."

By a violent effort Harcourt subdued his strong emotions, and became once more the cool, clear-headed man of business.

"We must kill or capture them all, but there must be no mistakes," he said, his manner in startling contrast to the excitement that he had so recently exhibited. "Joshua Bedell, the wounded man and the young fellow who calls himself Deadly Dash, are one and all murderers, but they must not be injured, if we can possibly take them alive. As for the others, they deserve death, and you will shoot them down without mercy."

"Remember, now, the three men whom I have named, must be captured, not shot; for the rope is their just portion."

A general assent was given, and a dozen men were selected by Tom Mason, including Harcourt and himself. Tom led the way, and in a few moments they were within sight of the tell-tale fire, where the surgeon was just putting the finishing touches to his work.

Stealthily they crept forward upon their unsuspecting prey and succeeded in gaining a position from whence they could command each one of the party with full certainty, before making a sound that hinted of their presence.

Then a dried branch snapped under the pressure of Edwin Harcourt's knee, as he sought thus to render his aim more certain, and as the eyes of the outlaws turned instinctively in that direction, Harcourt cried out:

"Fire! death to the outlawed assassins!"

And as though forgetful of his particular charge to his men, the villain with a steady aim, sent the contents of his shot-gun directly to the heart of Joshua Bedell!

CHAPTER XII.

DEADLY DASH PLAYS A LONE HAND.

WITH only that brief warning—that one suspicious sound as of a dried stick snapping beneath the tread of an approaching enemy—then came the cruel voice, drowned by the united explosion of a dozen rifles or shotguns. And then Deadly Dash found himself the only living person standing erect and unharmed beside that fatal fire!

Eager to make sure of their prey, the man-hunters, as soon as their deadly volley was fired, rushed forward with loud shouts, to seize upon and overpower the survivors who were doomed to the rope, before they could recover from the terrible surprise sufficiently to make any troublesome resistance.

But in this they counted without their host. Two of the enemies were alive, the oldest and youngest of the party, and both were men who knew not the meaning of personal fear.

The instant that the enemy showed themselves, Old Mythology, who lay, his back supported against a tree-trunk, and Deadly Dash, who stood erect in the full glow of the small fire, opened fire upon them with their revolvers. Sudden and terrible as the ambushade had been, it had not affected the nerves of those two dauntless spirits, for swift as were their motions, shot following shot in rapid succession, each bullet was billeted and went straight home to its mark.

The surprisers were surprised now, and their charge was checked momentarily.

That brief breathing space gave Old Mythology time to realize what had occurred, and the fact that his young master was still upon his feet, to all appearance unharmed.

The rare strength of his affection was made manifest then.

"Make a break for it, lad!" he whispered hoarsely. "Be lively an' you kin git away onder kiver o' the darkness. Make haste to the cave, an' fetch back help—go—quick!"

The last words were added with a cunning that was almost pathetic, for none could know better than the speaker that long before such a race could be made, he would be far beyond human aid. But he also knew that no purely personal consideration would induce Deadly Dash to abandon his side in that crisis of peril.

The enemy recoiled, but it was only for a moment.

"Rush in and take them alive if you can—if not, kill them!" shouted a fierce voice which Deadly Dash had no difficulty in recognizing as that of Edwin Harcourt.

It was this rather than the cunning appeal of his old friend that influenced the youth. He tried to catch a glimpse of the speaker, but at that moment a bush intervened, and he failed. Then, despite the command, several shots were hastily discharged by the enemy, one grazing the temple of the young man, while others cut his garments, but as if he bore a charmed life, blood was not drawn nor skin broken, as he made a swift, cat-like leap and passed beyond the limited circle of light.

Old Mythology believed Deadly Dash was acting on his advice, and holding his own life as of no value in comparison, he did all he could to insure the supposed fugitive a fair start.

As the enemy broke cover, he raised his revolver and sent a bullet through the breast of the foremost man, and would have added another victim to the price demanded for his life, had not Tom Mason swiftly swung around his rifle and shattered its stock over the dauntless fellow's head, doubling him over sideways, apparently dead.

But Deadly Dash had not taken to flight. He only sought to more nearly equalize the odds by taking advantage of the darkness, and he saw the stroke that ended the stubborn resistance of Old Mythology.

Quick as thought his revolver was leveled, but he was a moment too late to check the blow, and his bullet, striking a stout twig in its course, was diverted from its aim, whistling harmlessly past the trapper's ear.

"Scatter and surround him!" howled rather than shouted Edwin Harcourt, then he uttered a low cry that he knew would bring on the remainder of his men, and listened eagerly.

Deadly Dash heard all, as recorded above. He fully realized his peril, and knew that little short of a miracle could carry him safely through.

Bringing all his skill into play, he lay flat upon his stomach and crawled along like a human serpent, not in retreat, but seeking to gain a view of his enemy, Edwin Harcourt.

In a few moments he made out the position of Edwin Harcourt, when the latter, as the horsemen came up, called out his order, bidding them dismount and form a wide circle around the fire, then gradually contract their lines, beating every bush and covert until their game was found.

The plan was one that seemed to promise almost certain success, but Deadly Dash was nothing daunted; he knew that he could have his revenge, long ere the cordon was drawn closely about him.

Foot by foot, yard by yard he crept around, not the faintest noise or rustle betraying his progress, until finally he gained a point from whence he could obtain a clear view of his bitter enemy, outlined against the faint glow of the dying fire.

Steadily his revolver was raised until the sights drew full upon the head of Edwin Har-

court, who was kneeling at the foot of a tree, his gun tightly grasped ready for use when the game should break cover. His right elbow became clearly defined against the fire-light, Deadly Dash quickly shifted his aim and fired, crying out:

"Limb by limb—a thousand deaths in one!"

A wild yell of bitter agony burst from the wounded man, and was answered by a general rush on the part of the enemy toward the spot.

But Deadly Dash was prepared for this, and striking down Tom Mason, who chanced to be the man nearest him, leaving his knife sheathed in the trapper's heart, he broke through the line, leaped upon one of the horses, and sped away.

For nearly a mile he rode at full speed, then, knowing that he was followed, he alighted, struck his confiscated horse a fierce blow that sent it at a mad gallop along the road, then plunged into the woods.

All that has been detailed here passed with great rapidity, not more than ten minutes elapsing between the first and last shot around that fatal fire, and so it came to pass that Deadly Dash, having shaken off his pursuers, was far on his way to the cave when he heard sounds that told him the outlaws were hastening back to the rescue.

In fact, the band had nearly reached the cave when they heard the sounds of that deadly volley, and Seth Hovey, divining the truth, only paused to send Sally Bedell on in charge of two trusty men, then turned, and took the back trail.

Deadly Dash intercepted them, and quickly made known the terrible truth. The tidings were received with fierce curses of rage, and the men demanded to be led upon the enemy, that they might avenge their comrades.

Deadly Dash pushed ahead on foot, to guard against their running into an ambush, or of giving the alarm prematurely.

With Edwin Harcourt wounded and Tom Mason dead, the settlers had no one to take command in whom they could place full confidence, and so had beaten a retreat, but not without leaving their work behind them.

A piercing cry from their scout called the outlaws on, and as they rode up to the dying fire, they looked upon a blood-curdling sight.

Four blood-stained bodies hung dangling from the branches above, and beside them the severed end of a fifth rope.

Beneath this lay Old Mythology, with Deadly Dash pouring forth a fearful vow of vengeance upon the destroyers.

Before leaving, the settlers had hung both their dead and living enemies!

CHAPTER XIII.

"NO QUARTER!"

At their approach, Deadly Dash arose, his face pale as that of a corpse, but with a fire in his dark eyes such as no man ever beheld there before.

He stood quietly aside while the other bodies were being cut down, but then, as though actuated by a sudden thought, he nimbly climbed up the tree and unfasted the rope which had been used to suspend Old Mythology by the neck. This he coiled methodically around the horn of his saddle.

The hot rage of the outlaws did not easily cool. The brutal outrage—for it was plain that the majority of the victims had been butchered before being hanged—was regarded as a taunting challenge which they were eager to accept, regardless of the odds being against them.

"They are right," cried Deadly Dash, his voice sounding strangely cold and hard, coming so soon after the terribly strong burst of emotion which the body of his old friend had drawn forth. "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth! The struggle has begun, and can only end in the utter extermination of one side or the other. If we bow meekly under this bitter blow, they will be encouraged to deal us another and another."

"Let us charge in and pay them back in their own coin. Let us burn every building in the place. We can do it."

A guarded but hearty cheer greeted these words. Deadly Dash saw that his words had taken effect, and knew that he would have stout aid in avenging the death of his old friend, but the reflection only served to render his brain clearer, and he addressed the company briefly:

"To two persons, even more than the men whose hands applied these ropes, we owe the murder of our friends, and those are Black Dan Boller and Edwin Harcourt."

"The first may have escaped us, since we failed to find him when we searched Harcourt's house, but the other and greater criminal, we can easily put our hands on."

"He is badly wounded. I put a bullet through

his right elbow. I could have slain him, but he had wronged me and mine too deeply for such a merciful death."

"He was the head one of the gang. No doubt his fall discouraged them, and his wound would afford a good excuse for a retreat to the village, where his arm could be attended to."

"They will not dream of our daring to make another attack this night. We may find them on guard, though, and for this reason we must take certain precautions."

"Edwin Harcourt must be taken prisoner. I have sworn by the grave of my murdered parents—for murdered they were, and their death lies at his door!—that I will hang him by the same rope he hung my old friend. In order to keep this oath, I must make sure of him before the general alarm is raised."

"That will not be difficult, if we are prudent," said Seth Hovey. "Naturally they will look for us, if at all, from this side of the village, but we can make a circuit and approach by the south side. You and I, with one or two more, can steal ahead, and see if Harcourt is at his own house. If yes, we can make a dash, surround the building, take him prisoner, then burn down the cursed town!"

This was the general plan finally agreed to, though, of course, subject to certain modifications according to circumstances.

The dead were first to be disposed of for the time being.

It was now quite midnight, and time was precious. For that reason they could not take them on to the Retreat.

"They ain't much resk o' the hogs findin' 'em afore we git back, an' them's the only critters plenty enough fer us to be afeard o'," said our grizzled veteran, bluntly. "Leave 'em in the bushes yender, an' let's git down to business!"

No better plan could be devised, under the circumstances, and the five bodies were ranged side by side under cover, and a blanket spread above them. This was kept in place by a small quantity of brush, and then, with hearts that were on fire with a fierce lust for vengeance, the party took up the route with no quarter for their watchword.

Deadly Dash was mounted now, one of the outlaws, a good scout and woodsman, being dismounted to give him place, and sent on in advance to make sure the way was open.

Before they drew dangerously near the village, the guide led them by another road around so they could enter the place from the south, as less liable to discovery from that quarter.

The night was dark, but they could see from the lights in nearly every house that the villagers had been too greatly excited and alarmed to readily compose themselves to sleep.

"So much the better," uttered Deadly Dash, with a short, hard laugh. "If we should be seen as we enter town on foot, we will be taken for some of the townsmen, keeping our anxious vigils."

The horsemen were halted, and Seth Hovey briefly gave them their instructions.

They were to patiently await the signal, then the majority of them were to charge through the streets, shooting any and all who got in their way or attempted to interfere with the others, who were to use the blazing brands furnished in abundance by the glowing ruins, to set other buildings afire. They were to make a clean sweep. The village was to be obliterated.

This understood, he, with Deadly Dash and two trusty men, stole forward in single file, and soon reached the fence which surrounded the Harcourt mansion.

All was utter silence around the place. The lower story of the building was in darkness, and above, light streamed forth from only one window in the south side of the house.

"No doubt our bird is up there," muttered Hovey, in a guarded tone of voice. "We can take a look around, and if there is not a guard stationed here, we can burst in the door, rush upstairs, and make him prisoner before help can come."

"Look for the guard, first," was all that Deadly Dash replied.

The glowing light had given him an idea, provided it could be put into execution, and gliding along on that side of the house, he nimbly climbed up a broad-spreading white elm tree, that grew opposite the window.

From among the branches of this tree, he believed he could look in at the open window and find out who were inmates of the chamber. Though he felt tolerably confident that he would see Edwin Harcourt there, there was just a possibility of his having stopped elsewhere—perhaps at the house of a doctor or surgeon, where his wound could be more speedily attended to.

This doubt, however, was shortly dissipated, and crouching there upon a gnarled and twisted limb, Deadly Dash looked in through the open window upon the bitterest enemy the wide earth contained for him.

Edwin Harcourt was half sitting up, half lying, upon a bed, facing the window, while a short, dumpy little man, evidently a doctor, was putting the last touches upon the bandages which enveloped the wounded arm.

Deadly Dash saw that there was another bed in the chamber, and though he could only catch a faint glimpse of the occupant, something told him that it was Black Dan Boller.

One other fact he noticed, then hastily descended to the ground.

He quickly rejoined Seth Hovey, and made known his discoveries, then listened attentively to the report of his comrades.

"There is no one in the grounds besides ourselves, as far as I can discover," said the outlaw chief, speaking in a guarded tone, "but there is some one in the hall, awake and apparently on duty, for as I listened at the key-hole, I could make out the sounds of breathing, and heard the click of a hammer being raised and lowered, as if he or they were making sure their weapons were in working condition."

"It may be that he has stationed a force in there, to make sure," said Deadly Dash, coolly, "but even so, we can circumvent him. Do you steal up close to the door, and wait for my signal. I will enter the building by a route I know, and make sure of our game. Then, if needs be, I can hold my own against the guard until you can bring up the boys. One stout charge on their part will settle it, I fancy."

Though their acquaintance had been but of brief duration, Seth Hovey had already learned the utter uselessness of argument when once Deadly Dash had made up his mind to any certain course, and as the youth glided away, he and his two men returned to the front of the building.

Deadly Dash returned to the white-elm tree, and once more scaled it, working his way along the stout limb that stretched out toward the end of the house, nearly on a level with the window through which shone the bright lamp-light.

Steadying himself by the side limbs, Deadly Dash rose erect, and measured the brief space between himself and the windows. The distance would have been nothing under ordinary circumstances, but the feat which he contemplated was one of peril sufficient to daunt ninety-nine men out of a hundred.

He meant to leap from the limb, through the open window.

Were his foot to slip—were he to make the least miscalculation and strike his head or feet against the sash above or the casing below, he would be hurled down full twenty feet, and besides alarming the enemy, almost certainly cripple himself.

But the reckless youth never hesitated for a moment; only paused long enough to steady himself, then shot across the intervening space, more like an india-rubber ball than a human being, forced thus to double himself up in order to pass in at the narrow, contracted space.

True to his intention, Deadly Dash passed through the space left by the raised sash, and alighted fairly upon his feet in the room. Quickly recovering his balance, before even a cry of terror or surprise could come from the lips of either of the three men, he whipped forth a revolver in each hand, uttering in a sharp, resolute tone that carried conviction with it:

"Utter a sound above a whisper, and I will kill you. Doctor, tear up one of those sheets and bind these two men hand and foot. Refuse, and you are a dead man!"

CHAPTER XIV.

OVERTAKEN AT LAST.

THE medical man was good enough student of human nature to see that these words were not idle ones, and that unless he wished to leave a deplorable vacancy in the bosom of his family, he had better obey the stern command and apply bandages to his patients after quite another fashion.

Edwin Harcourt cursed, and offered some slight resistance; but his severe wound had weakened him and he was quickly quieted when Deadly Dash leveled his revolver, not at his brains, but at his sound elbow, saying sternly:

"Silence, or I will cripple you so that you cannot struggle. Remember—limb after limb!"

The little doctor, never intended by nature for a hero, was terribly agitated, but finally

managed to complete his task with tolerable neatness, then Deadly Dash said:

"Lead the way down-stairs. If any person attempts to bar our passage, convince them that I am a friend. If you fail to open or have opened the front door, I will do myself the pleasure of opening one through your body—large enough to give your soul free exit. You comprehend?"

Luckily for the worthy doctor there was no occasion for Deadly Dash to put his threat into execution.

The negro servant to whom allusion has been repeatedly made, was the sole occupant of the hall, and as he turned at the sound of descending footsteps, he recognized the white face which overtopped the little physician, and half beside himself with terror, he discharged one barrel of his revolver without any attempt at taking aim, then flung open the door with a yell of terror—only to be knocked down by a swift and sure stroke of the heavy revolver wielded by Seth Hovey.

At one word from Deadly Dash, the outlaw chief sounded the signal that set his band to work, and while the youth returned up-stairs, the others bound the doctor hand and foot and unceremoniously pitched him into a dense clump of shrubbery at a safe distance from the house.

The echoes of that shrill blast had not died away before the wild yells of the outlaws, thirsting for revenge, carried consternation to the hearts of the villagers for the second time that night. And then the spiteful reports of their revolvers came more and more rapidly as they thundered up the street, bent on literally carrying out the stern orders they had received—to slay and spare not—to give no quarter save to the women and children—to ply the fire-brand until every building in the village was aglow!

Satisfied that the dread work which he had sworn to complete was well begun, Seth Hovey bade his two men follow him, and hastened up-stairs, where he found that the second prisoner was indeed Black Dan Boller.

As was afterward learned, when the first alarm was given, the wounded traitor, imagining the attack was for the purpose of obtaining possession of his person, had left his bed, crawled through a back window and concealed himself upon the roof of the kitchen until all was quiet again.

There was no outburst of any sort on the part of the outlaws when they recognized and took possession of the traitor. He would have had more hope if there had been more eagerness displayed; for his recent comrades treated him as though he was *already a dead man*.

Deadly Dash drew his knife and severed the bonds that confined the feet of Edwin Harcourt, whom he seemed to regard as his especial captive, then forced the wounded man to arise and precede him down-stairs. The others followed, bearing Boller between them, like a corpse.

Out of doors, the youth still led the way, but paused at the gate.

"Let me see his house illuminated," he said, coldly.

The hint was quite sufficient. Leaving their chief in charge of their prisoner, the two men retraced their steps, and working with a will, had the red flames shining through every window in the house in less than ten minutes, adding its share to the ruddy glare that was turning night into day.

"Your son is dead, your property destroyed, you are a cripple; there is nothing but your life left, and that forfeit will be claimed before the sun rises," said Deadly Dash, in a hard, monotonous tone, his hand closing upon the shoulder of Edwin Harcourt, and pushing him toward the spot where the horses had been left.

When these were reached, Deadly Dash, aided by Seth Hovey, lifted Harcourt into the saddle that bore the coil of rope, and then the youth sprang lightly up behind him, saying to the outlaw chief:

"You will find me where we left our murdered friends."

This was all, and without pausing for a reply, the young avenger, his arms around the body of his bitter enemy, rode rapidly away through the night.

He paid no attention to the wild yells of the blood-and-fire intoxicated outlaws, nor did he seem to hear the constant, dropping fire of pistols, followed now and then by a loud scream of agony which denoted yet another tragedy to be added to the dread record of that terrible night.

One by one fresh points of flame sprung up, telling of another home being sacrificed to the manes of the murdered.

Once or twice Edwin Harcourt attempted to speak, but as often Deadly Dash would clasp his throat with fingers rigid as steel, only relax-

ing his grasp when his captive relapsed into sullen silence as preferable to strangulation.

And thus that strange ride continued until the place of the ambushment was reached, Deadly Dash drawing rein beside the nearly extinguished coals, directly beneath the stout limb from which still dangled four ropes like sable serpents.

Dismounting, Deadly Dash tied the horse to a stout bush, then renewed the fire until it flamed up brightly, knowing that Edwin Harcourt was unable to make a successful flight on foot.

Then, closely watched all the while by the doomed criminal, the youth removed the rope from the saddle-bow, and formed a running noose in one end, saying, in a slow, monotonous tone:

"You used this rope to hang the only true friend I had left upon earth, Gilbert Sampson. When I cut him down, I swore never to eat, sleep or know rest until I had fitted the noose around your neck and witnessed your dying struggles—hanged by the same rope you murdered him with."

"Say your prayers, Edwin Harcourt, for your time has come!"

The tone was so quiet, his actions so gentle and deliberate that Harcourt could not believe in the truth of the words uttered.

Instead of prayers, bitter curses came from his lips in a flood. He even laughed, declaring that it would take more than the empty vapors of a crack-brained boy to frighten him.

"Tell me what you want, in so many words," he added. "You can't scare me with your nonsense, but I may conclude to tell you what you are trying to find out. Something about that Madden, I suppose?"

"You can tell me nothing new about that black deed," said Deadly Dash, in the same strangely calm voice. "I know you followed him from the gambling-table, where he and my father quarreled; that you murdered him for the large sum of money he had on his person; that you and your tools swore the crime upon my father, and had him arrested; that you were afraid the evidence would not convict him, or that something damaging to yourself might come out at the trial, and so you and yours raised a mob that tore my father from jail—that hung him like a sheep-stealing cur, without even the mockery of a trial. And I know, too, that in consequence of this terrible blow, my mother sickened and died of a broken heart. All this I know; what more can you tell me?"

"The name of the man who murdered Fred Madden—"

"I know it: Edwin Harcourt," piteously interrupted Deadly Dash, with a bitter laugh. "You are tried, found guilty and sentenced. Say your prayers, and may the Lord have mercy on your sinful soul! For I will show none to your body."

Even as he spoke, Deadly Dash mounted behind his victim and knotted his rope to one of those dangling above his head, then fitted the noose around the neck of Edwin Harcourt.

For the first time the old sinner began to believe that his life was really in danger, and with a sudden change of tone, he condescended to beg for time, to ask for mercy.

"Such mercy as you showed my father—my mother—my friend! Your crimes have made me a devil without a heart. Though you had ten thousand lives, I could and would take them one by one, and laugh joyfully as your groans and shrieks made sweet music in my ears!"

"Think not of mercy—of life, but of death. Five minutes I give you—no more. I am more merciful than you. *They* were hung without time for a single prayer. Five minutes—no more!"

Watch in hand the youth stood beside his horse, the prayers and pleadings of the wounded wretch falling upon stony ears.

The time was up—Deadly Dash struck the horse a sharp blow with his hand—it leaped forward with an affrighted snort.

The rope was stretched taut—the body of Edwin Harcourt hung swaying to and fro, slowly revolving.

And Deadly Dash stood coldly looking upon his awful work.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TRUTH FROM EVIL LIPS.

SITTING beside the faintly glowing fire, his elbows upon his knees and chin supported on his hands, watching the dark, motionless figure that hung before him—thus it was that Seth Hovey found Deadly Dash where he and his men, their work of death and desolation thoroughly accomplished, returned from the ruin-

ed village whose fires still lighted up the heavens for many a mile around.

Black Dan Boller turned sick and faint at heart as he was brought into close contact with what had once been the man to whom he was fast linked in the bonds of mutual crimes, for he knew that he was none the less doomed to death, unless he could find someone to snatch him from the hands of the comrades whom he had betrayed.

During his ride thither Hovey had decided upon his course of procedure. He knew that Sally Bedell would be on the look-out for their return, and fearing lest she should discover the death of her father before he could gain time to break the dreadful tidings, he resolved to leave a few men behind to bring on the bodies, while he and the others pressed on in advance. Then, were Sally to ask for her father, he could truthfully tell her that he was coming, and then, when alone with her, gradually and tenderly prepare her mind.

Among the other plunder brought from the village, were a goodly number of horses, and Deadly Dash accepted one of these in the place of the one he had permitted to go free.

"Leave this body as it hangs," he said to the men who were to remain behind, "as a sample of how Dudley Dashwood avenges his wrongs."

Following the bed of the creek, as once before described, Seth Hovey pressed steadily on until the cave-retreat was reached, where, as he anticipated, he found his betrothed awake and on the alert with a tearful greeting—tears of joy at his safe return, but the poor girl was doomed to shed tears of bitter grief ere those of gladness were dry upon her cheeks.

Deadly Dash entered the chamber into which the prisoner was led, though barely aware of his presence or even existence when, while moodily pacing to and fro, he chanced to encounter the anxious, terrified gaze which never once shifted from his face. Even that made only a momentary impression upon his mind, for the terrible past was coming up before him, bit by bit.

There was his happy childhood in a sunny Southern home. A loving, beautiful but delicate mother. A proud, handsome, indulgent father, who thought nothing too good for his dear ones. And there was the quaint old hunter who taught him the wonders of the field and forest, and set his brain on fire with strange, thrilling tales of wild life toward the setting sun.

Then came a season of travel, for the health of the mother. The father remained behind. And while they were in Europe, a letter came to her, bearing terrible tidings. Just what, beyond the one fact that his father was dead, he, Dudley, did not learn for years afterward. But it was dreadful enough to wring the wife's heart dry, and she never lived to reach her home. She placed Dudley at a school in the North, then died of a broken heart.

There was a guardian whom Dudley never saw, who paid all bills, and for three years he had remained at school. At the end of that time, he fled, because, in a boyish quarrel, one of his mates let out the fearful truth—Beverley Dashwood had been lynched for the murder of a man with whom he had quarreled over the gambling table.

Straight to his old home the youth went, and finding Gilbert Sampson, learned the black truth. He—Sampson—had fought hard for his old master, but was nearly killed, and could do nothing.

The Harcourts, father and son, had been the moving spirits in the lynching, and though they had tried to live down the odium following that act, finally were forced to flee from the ban of public opinion.

From that day Dudley Dashwood was a boy no longer. He set cunning men to work to find out whether the Harcourts had fled, and meanwhile, with Old Mythology for a tutor, unceasingly practiced with rifle, pistol and knife, until he was master of the different weapons.

Time and again he started out on some fancied clew, but not until the day on which this record opens, did he succeed in finding the man whom he had sworn to kill.

Believing his father had been innocent of the crime for which he was lynched, was reason sufficient for him to risk what he did in the attempt to preserve Joshua Bedell from a like fate.

Thus far his reflections had wandered, when Black Dan Boller hesitatingly pronounced his full name, adding:

"I saw your father murdered, and that for a crime he was innocent of. If I can prove this—if I can clear his name from every suspicion—will you—"

"He can't do nothin' fer you, even ef he wanted, ever so much," bluntly interposed one of the men placed as guards upon the traitor. "As soon as the boss comes in, you'll be tried, an' you know what that means to one as plays the traitor to his solemn oath. You're no better than a dead man!"

"Save me from them, and I swear to reveal the name of the man who murdered Fred Madden!" cried Boller, clinging to the hope of a respite, even though death should still be his reward.

Just then Seth Hovey came in, and to him Deadly Dash turned.

As briefly as possible he related his past history, as faintly shadowed forth here, then repeated what Boller said.

"I know that by the laws which govern your band, he has justly forfeited his life, but if he speaks true—if he can clear the name of my murdered father by revealing the actual criminal and bringing the deed home to him, you must allow me to take him back to Virginia, or else to kill me too."

"Threats can gain you nothing that goodwill or a sense of justice on our part would refuse you," replied Hovey, in the same cold tone. "Let him tell his story. If justice can be done in no other way, he may go with you. But our eye and hand will bear him company, and at the proper time will claim our own."

Black Dan hesitated, but he knew that certain death would be his portion here, and he wisely concluded to run the risk of a full confession. At worst, he could but be killed; at best, during his long journey to Virginia he might effect his escape, or even get clear with his life, after trial.

There is no need to follow his words one by one. He was very, trying to soften and excuse the part he had played in the tragedy of the past.

He was a gambler by profession, though for the most part an unlucky one, always in need of a friend to "stake him," and so a fitting tool for those who were more lucky, or keener witted than himself.

On the night of the murder, he was in the gambling hall where, among others, Beverley Dashwood, Edwin Harcourt and Frederick Madden were playing.

The betting ran high, and all three of those named were winners. Between them, the principal faro-table was forced to suspend, and then the three successful gamblers sat down together to play draw-poker. They agreed to play freeze-out, or continue the game until one was the winner of all.

From the outset, fortune favored Madden, and in an hour, Harcourt retired, completely cleaned out. The other two continued, both drinking freely, but fortune still smiled upon Madden, and as he swept down the last stake, Dashwood, heated by liquor, insinuated that he, Madden, was more indebted to his fingers than his head for his unbroken good fortune.

The lie was given, blows passed, and when the players were separated, both men uttered bitter threats toward the other.

Madden, with nearly fifty thousand dollars in his pockets, was followed and murdered, by Black Dan Boller.

Edwin Harcourt found him robbing the dead man, and by threats of exposure, induced Boller to conspire with him against Dashwood, whom he hated for some cause unknown to Dan.

The murderer had no choice. The charge was made, sworn to, Dashwood was arrested and committed for trial. Then came the lynching, and that over, Harcourt, defying his ally, kept all of the money so bloodily earned.

There were many more details in the confession, but enough has been said for the understanding of the reader.

Seth Hovey listened intently, and at the conclusion said:

"All of the band must be here when the decision is given, but I think I can promise you what you ask. In clearing the memory of your father, Boller will seal his own death-warrant, and if he graces the gallows, our laws will be avenged also."

While he was speaking, the signal from without heralded the coming of the outlaws with the bodies of their comrades, and Deadly Dash mechanically moved forward with the rest, to receive the ghastly cortege.

But what a surprise awaited him!

A pale, tottering man entered the cave on foot, and with a faint laugh, fell forward into the arms of the youth.

It was Old Mythology, still alive and in the flesh!

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

THE escape of Old Mythology was little short of a miracle.

As the reader is aware, he had been knocked senseless by Tom Mason, with the butt end of a rifle. This, added to the excessive loss of blood during the ride from the village, rendered his pulse so faint that the fact of his still being alive, escaped the notice of the excited settlers, and only for the malignancy of Edwin Harcourt, by no means lessened with the excruciating pain of his shattered elbow, he would have been left where he lay, among his slaughtered companions. But Harcourt bade his men hang the carcasses up as a warning to the rest of the outlaws of the fate the future had in store for them, and this command was carried out.

Among the others, Old Mythology was drawn a couple of feet from the ground, but as all were believed dead, no especial care was taken to see that the nooses fitted snug, and that around his throat failed to draw tight.

No doubt had the proper precautions been taken, he could have been restored to consciousness long before he awoke to life again, but every body believed him dead, and it was not until Deadly Dash and the main force of the outlaws were at the cave, and those left as a guard were preparing the horses to receive their ghastly burden, that he gave signs of returning sensibility.

As soon as they could realize the truth, the outlaws did what they could to assist him, and thanks to their liquor and care, Old Mythology was just able to walk when the cave retreat was reached.

That morning a vote was taken among the outlaws, and when they were satisfied that Black Dan Boller would almost certainly end his career upon the gallows for the murder of Frederick Madden, they agreed to yield him up to Deadly Dash.

That same day Dick Dado made his appearance with startling news.

The entire county was aroused by the destruction of the village, and measures were being taken for the utter extermination of the band of outlaws. They were to be hunted night and day until the outrage was avenged.

Seth Hovey collected his men and placed the situation fairly before them. That their occupation was gone in that part of the State, all could see as well as himself.

"All are absolved from the oath that has bound us together," he added. "Those who wish to do so, may leave the cave, with their share from the treasury, on pledging themselves to take every possible precaution to leave no trace by which our enemies can find the secret entrance. But if you will take my advice, you will do as I do: remain in here until the first fury of the hunt is over."

"We have water in plenty, and there is no danger of our starving while there are nearly a hundred horses in the stable."

To a man, the outlaws remained, snug and safe while the whole country was scourged by hundreds of enraged enemies. No living man outside of the cave was in possession of the secret of their hiding-place.

For nearly a month they lay there, then emerged one by one and sought other more healthy regions for the exercise of their particular talents.

Some were recognized, captured and hung, but the majority succeeded in escaping from the State.

Among the successful ones were Seth Hovey, Sally Bedell and with them little Dick Dado.

They crossed the river into Illinois, and at the first favorable opportunity, were made man and wife.

Seth Hovey, partly because he was sick of such a life, but mainly through the persuasion of his wife, never more sinned against the laws of the country he lived in, but pre-empted a homestead and settled down as a steady-going granger, having Dick Dado to assist him.

Deadly Dash and Old Mythology—his arm nearly cured during that month of seclusion—procured a flat-boat and in it escaped all unpleasant questions, as well as safely conveyed their prisoner to the scene of his past crimes.

Black Dan Boller was duly hung for the murder of Frederick Madden, and the clouded memory of Beverley Dashwood was cleared from all stain.

But Deadly Dash could not long remain where all spoke so loudly of his innocent childhood, and in company with faithful Old Mythology, he turned his face toward the setting sun, and left the home of his youth forever.

THE END.

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